

FULL SWING

BY FRANK DANBY



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BY

FRANK DANBY

AUTHOR OF "PIGS IN CLOVER," "BACCARAT," ETC.

"The Wheel is come full circle."



PHILADELPHIA AND LONDON
J. B. LIPPINCOTT COMPANY

1914

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PUBLISHED MARCH, 1914

PRINTED BY J. B. LIPPINCOTT COMPANY
AT THE WASHINGTON SQUARE PRESS
PHILADELPHIA, U. S. A.

DEDICATION

TO
H. M. M.

WHOSE EXCEPTIONAL FACE AND FIGURE I HAVE
SOMETIMES BORROWED TO DECK A HERO OR
ADORN A VILLAIN, BUT WHOSE FINE LOYALTY
AND GENIUS FOR FRIENDSHIP I HAVE ALWAYS
ENJOYED WITHOUT ATTEMPTING TO CHRONICLE

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FULL SWING

CHAPTER I

AGATHA WANSTEAD was barely ten years old when the great orchid, secured from the Brazils after infinite tribulation and almost unimaginable expenses, arrived at Marley. She saw the long-expected treasure unswathed from its packings, wondering at her father's excitement. Big, bulbous and unbeautiful, it showed no promise of efflorescence, appearing dry, unwieldy and ill-shapen.

"At last! At last!" cried her father exultingly. "This will astonish them! The *Odontoglossum Cæleste* at last! Absolutely the first to arrive in England! We shall have it in flower for the Horticultural Show."

Sanders came with it, the young Scotch gardener who was for the future to have charge of all the orchids, to reign, with such supremacy as Squire Wanstead should permit, over the quarter of an acre of glass that furnished prize-winners for all the flower-shows in England. A space in one of the houses had been reserved for the new-comer, and there through the autumn and winter it hung quiescent in its new home.

The attention of the whole household, indoors and out, was concentrated upon the plant, and when spring came Agatha heard Sanders tell her father that it was putting forth signs of growth, that it was "plumping up." But his reports varied and anxiety deepened. Already April had come, when the child, motherless, a little lonely and neglected, but never without knowledge of the high position into which she was born and the desire to be worthy of it, began to doubt whether the plant was properly treated. She heard her father talking about it constantly, questioning this or that. Surely what applied to growing children applied to

growing plants. Fresh air was the one thing upon which the new doctor who had just settled in Great Marley insisted. His advice had been taken. She was no longer cooped up in the school-room for lessons, but all day long was in the garden or the woods. Already she was better, knew she too was "plumping up," and felt the spring in her veins.

Poor plant! She thought of it by night and by day, of how it was hanging up in the steaming house, stifling, unable to breathe. She herself could hardly breathe in that hot, moist air. How wonderful to be able to help it, to help her father to a great joy in its growth, to help Sanders! Thus thinking, she at last put thought into action, waking up in the middle of the night, conscience-stricken at her own supineness in the matter. The bed was warm and comfortable, and for a few minutes she lay and wondered whether the morning would not be time enough for action. But it was not her disposition then, or ever, to do the easy thing. She got out of the warm bed hurriedly, dressed as well as she was able in the limited illumination of the night-light, ran downstairs, and fumbled open the locks of the big front door. Then she went swiftly down the steps and across the grass to the hot-house. That, too, was locked, but she knew where the key was kept. She found and fitted it, opened the door; the hot, steamy air rushed out convincingly, and the stifled plant had fresh air at last.

She slept well when she got back to her own room. Less well the next night, when the heinousness of her conduct was brought home to her. All the orchids in the hot-house were dead or dying, the new *Odontoglossum* amongst them. She slept less well, not that she was conscious of, or admitted, guilt, not because she was scolded or punished, but because she was perplexed that one could do good and evil could come of it, because already she felt dimly that the right path might not always be easy to find.

Agatha's conscience was ever her torment and her undoing. At fifteen years she was almost overpowered by the sense of her responsibilities; awed by the knowledge that she was Miss Wanstead of Marley, the last descendant of the

ancient house. She tried to talk to her father about it, but he responded lightly. She was already uneasy that her father took his business as a magistrate and a great landowner too carelessly, that he devoted too much of his time to horticulture, and especially to orchids. When he became fully aware of her solicitude for him, he sent her to boarding school, where she was homesick and miserable, realising that her own blundering had brought about her banishment, but not more reconciled to it on that account.

True, his hot-houses, warm-houses, cool-houses, his Dendrobiums and Odontoglossums, Vandas and Cattleyas were more important to Squire Wanstead than Marley or his young daughter. He was the first of the orchidaceans. What began as a pastime ended as a passion. Far and near he sought for rare specimens. His experiments in hybridisation were the talk of the horticultural world as early as 1863. He had neither time nor inclination to discuss ethics with his young daughter, it was easier to rid himself of her.

One experiment he made of a culture less exiguous. In his sixtieth year, Agatha still at school, he became besotted over a pale English rose, importing it hastily to the terraced garden of the Court, where, like so many of his other importations, it failed to flourish. He and his daughter were alike impulsive, and came into sad conflict over this ill-considered action.

When Agatha returned from school, full of desire to be a companion and help to her father, to take her place as lady of the manor and be a benefactress to all Marley, she found herself confronted by a young stepmother about to bear a Marley heir, and by a father comparatively indifferent to the greatness of his position and completely oblivious of hers. Little Marley interested him very little, and Great Marley not at all.

The young stepmother wanted smart clothes and jewellery, a house in town, new carriages and liveries, more horses. Squire Wanstead's hobby was an expensive one. And at Little Marley cottages were in need of repair, the sanitation was considerably worse than primitive; there was no district

nurse or cottage hospital. Agatha's sense of duty burned hot within her; she was young and spoke in season and out of season. "They are our people, Marley people; they look to us for help, and we are doing nothing for them. . . ."

"You are a bore, Agatha; nothing but a bore," was her father's final and irritated answer. "Damn the cottages and Little Marley. Great Marley, too, if you like. Can't you leave things alone?"

"The rain comes through the roofs, the woodwork is all rotten; they ought to be rebuilt. No money should be spent until that is done," she persisted.

"I believe she grudges me the very food I eat, the clothes I wear," complained her stepmother.

"I grudge you nothing."

Agatha saw right and wrong in unshaded lines of black and white. She was conscientious and utterly honest, without guile.

"But we are not doing our duty, not doing the right thing by our people."

The doctor from Great Marley had convinced her that something should be done, and she spoiled the dinner, as she had spoiled the luncheon, by talking of drains and diphtheria, water and germs.

"Such talk is so bad for me," pouted young Mrs. Wanstead.

"Can't you see you are upsetting her?" said the squire angrily.

"Dr. Reid says I am not to be agitated," echoed the expectant mother, plaintively.

Agatha took life seriously, and wanted to do her duty in a properly feudal manner. There was hardly a truce in the arguments that ensued between her and her futile, extravagant stepmother, between her and her irritated father. Her desire for justice and sense of responsibility were streaked with periods of doubt, fears lest she lacked filial piety. Although she could not help criticising her father, she had a deep-seated respect for him as the head of the house. She would have cared for him but that her heart had not begun

to grow ; it was so overlaid with conscientiousness. Yet there was undoubtedly a substratum of tenderness in it, and when her feeble stepmother was ill and nervous, she made tentative, a little awkward, and somewhat pathetic, efforts toward reconciliation.

The moment was inopportune for the expected event. The threatened diphtheria at Marley made its appearance in the form of one mild case of endemic typhoid. But instead of new drainage, there was a hasty exodus to London. That it was the season for Messrs. Protheroe and Morris's auction sales of orchids may have influenced Squire Wanstead, but he never admitted this, nor that the season's gaieties, too much dissipation, and many imprudences were responsible for the disastrous result. The baby girl was born into a motherless world. There was no male heir to unentailed Marley, there was only a little stepsister whose birth cost her mother's life and left Squire Wanstead, his mind staggering a little under the blow, more unreasonable than before, and with a perpetual grievance, a grievance that he nurtured until the end. He was convinced that Agatha had driven them from Marley, and was responsible for her stepmother's death.

Squire Wanstead was never the same man after his second wife died in childbirth. He became querulous and always more exacting and unreasonable, accepting many sacrifices from his elder daughter, but never forgiving her ; dying with a dim idea that it was her fault, too, that the *Odontoglossum Caleste* showed leaves but never a spike.

Agatha suffered his reproaches, believing sometimes that they were deserved. For, incidentally, it has to be admitted that no infection spread, the sporadic case of typhoid having no successor. The form her remorse took was the care she gave to the bereaved baby. Her troublesome conscience made it inevitable.

Suitors came to Marley after her father's death. She had as much of good looks as was compatible with complete indifference to them, owing nothing to dress or cosmetics. Her skin was clear and her eyes bright ; she was accounted some-

thing of an heiress. Sir John Campden came from Denham with the lure of adjoining land; Lord Deerhaven, from Amherst, with a pedigree as distinguished as her own, and, surprisingly, Andrew McKay, the family lawyer, familiar to her and valued, but not associated in her mind with courtship.

But she would have none of them, more serious things than courtship absorbed her. At three-and-twenty she was mistress of Marley, her little stepsister Monica, and the welfare of all the tenantry.

There had been a gathering of orchidaceans at her father's funeral and handsome tributes in the Press, and she determined to sustain the reputation of the Marley Court hot-houses and her father's culture. She was full of good resolutions, and if she magnified her own importance in the scheme of creation, she was nevertheless, and secretly, somewhat diffident of her capacity to fulfil her obligations. Her father's attitude toward her had cut away some of her self-esteem and implanted a deep-rooted shyness. Marley, of course, was the capital of the universe. She saw Little Marley redrained, schools built, public-houses banished and clubs substituted. What she never saw at all was Andrew McKay looking at her with appreciative eyes.

Three generations of McKays had kept the dusty archives of Marley. Andrew knew everything that was to be known about the history of the family, could advise about leases and forfeitures and the powers of local government boards. He could talk, too, about orchids, and had, indeed, a taste for horticulture.

He came to her a month after her father's funeral, a strong, reliable man, with a slight Scotch accent and a Scotch intensity of purpose, a few years older than herself, and with no idea that she looked upon him as anything but her equal. And why not? The small landed gentry, and it was amongst these that the heiress of Marley was placed, held no undue importance in his mind. He had ample means, a fine county business, and a high reputation. It was time he took a wife, and Agatha was the wife he wanted.

For a month he had been coming and going, making his

meaning clear. So he thought. But Agatha had seen only in his attentions the little business matters that he had used as excuses; the proving of her father's will and satisfaction of the claims of the Inland Revenue, the transfer of farms and resettlement of tenures. She was always glad when he came. He was sympathetic with all her views, clear-minded, sound on sanitation and the better housing of the agricultural labourer. Unlike her father and the majority of her acquaintances, he did not say it was no concern of hers, nor show by disapproval that he thought her interest in such things unwomanly.

But, nevertheless, on the day when he pushed the papers on one side, and abruptly, without any preamble, asked her if she would marry him, she was dumbfounded. At first she thought she could have been no more astonished if Sanders himself had asked her. But she quickly recognised the absurdity of the parallel. When she remembered that Andrew McKay was her equal in everything but blood she grew hot, for she was not really a snob, only somewhat overburdened by her lineage.

She answered hastily that it was impossible, then, quite seriously, that she never intended to marry. Her flush emboldened him.

"It will take me years to put the estate in order," she said breathlessly, and to gain time.

"I could help you."

"I don't want any help."

He pressed his suit, and she took refuge in phrases that even to her own ears began to sound empty and meaningless. Although she was seeing him in a new aspect, she could not deny that she had always liked him, and sometimes listened to him. Sir John Campden was red-haired, with white eyelashes, and coarse, freckled hands. It had cost her nothing to refuse him, although their lands lay in a ring fence. Lord Deerhaven was a delicate decadent, talking culture, but needing money to patch up his broken fortunes. She had sent him away without a qualm. Neither of them had spoken as

Andrew McKay was speaking now, nor looked at her in the same way.

He got up from the table and came over to her.

"I thought you knew I cared for you."

"Oh, no!"

"I told your father of my wish before he died, and he was quite content."

"My father!"

"That surprises you. I don't know why."

"Only because—because——" But she could not tell him why. He would have taken her hand, but she put it behind her.

"I . . . I don't like that sort of thing," she said. The blood was hot in her cheeks.

"What sort of thing?"

"Love making."

He was sorry for her flush and awkwardness; thinking it virginal, not unseemly, part of her unique charm.

"Then I won't make love to you." He added quietly, "Not yet." At which she reddened more and thought it was from indignation. "I have to persuade you first to marry me. Will you talk it out with me?"

It was difficult for her to refuse when he stood so close to her, clear-eyed and strong, rugged yet purposeful, quite new in this aspect.

"You can say what you like;" and then added quickly: "but my mind is quite made up."

"Against matrimony, or against me?" he asked.

"Matrimony—you—both." She found it difficult to recover her self-possession.

"Because of your responsibilities and duties here?"

"Yes, partly. And Monica." She was hard pressed for excuses; she had not guessed she liked him so well.

"A husband and children are the best responsibilities for a woman."

"I don't think so; not for a woman in my position. The idea is old-fashioned." She was standing up, speaking a little more quickly than was usual with her.

"Perhaps it is old-fashioned to want you for my wife. But I do."

What was in her eyes and voice made her fearful of herself.

"If you will take me for a husband you will take a man who cares for you more than he can tell."

"I don't want a husband," she answered abruptly, reddening again, as any girl who was not a Miss Wanstead of Marley might have done.

"You don't know what you want. How should you?" he said tenderly. His arms would have gone about her, but she was holding herself too upright. "Let me teach you. I understand you better than anyone else has ever understood you, or ever will; the hard surface and difficult softness beneath; how dogmatic you are, and yet impulsive; how easily moved and quickly ashamed of it."

"I hate being analysed. I am not at all easily moved."

But he could see her uneasiness, and was encouraged by it.

"You will not admit it, but you are moved now. Perhaps you like me better than you know." He went closer to her.

But he was employing the wrong methods. Agatha was not really like other girls and women. She had a sense rudimentary or lacking, stumbling through life, therefore, as a lame man walks. She resented Andrew McKay's advance. Finding herself breathless, as if she had been running, she was angry with him, with herself, and with the circumstances; she was sure it was only anger she felt.

"You can't mean to send me away, to say 'no' to me. There is nothing you want to do in which I could not be of use to you. No woman is fit to stand alone, you least of all."

Her instinctive sex-antagonism took quick refuge in exclamation, denial.

"I! I am not fit to stand alone! I want no help from anyone."

"It is not true, dear, it is not true."

And when he called her "dear" her heart shook, although outwardly she was still rigid and unconvinced. He went on, although perhaps with less confidence, for he had hoped by now to find her in his arms.

"For all you are so strong, you are weak; your heart is soft under that surface hardness. Your father imposed upon you; the baby does so already; other people will. You don't know yourself."

"Nobody can impose upon me; it is not true."

"You need someone to care for you, to see you make no bad mistakes, help your folly to wisdom, your dear conscientious follies. I love you." He may not have been a good wooer, but he was an earnest one.

When Andrew McKay said he loved her, notwithstanding her missing sense, right in the soft core of that small, hard heart of hers Agatha was conscious of a vibration, something that in an ordinary girl might have brought them together. But the vibration inspired Agatha with fear, and she defended herself from him hurriedly, impetuously, and so well that he retreated from her, chilled, disappointed.

"You will think differently some day," was the last thing he said. "I can wait."

Having brought him to this she may have repented, but she succeeded so well in disguising it, resuming their business talk as if nothing had interrupted it, that he became reluctantly convinced she meant what she said, that she would not marry, that under the clear skin and bright eyes she was not a woman at all, but only a syllogist. He asked her the same question again, nevertheless, on several occasions. But, true to her want of temperament, the more she inclined to him the greater seemed the necessity of retreat. And in the end, his heart not caught in the rebound, but feeling the necessity of a home, he found a more amenable, if less rare, woman, proposed to her, and was gladly accepted.

Andrew McKay married. And that was the end of Agatha's girlhood. He had come to mean so much more to her than either of them knew or guessed. She had said "no," and "no" again to him, but never thought of him marrying elsewhere. Perhaps he realised it when he made the announcement and saw the sudden pallor of her cheeks. But he may well have thought, even then, that he had been mistaken. For she congratulated him with apparent sincerity, and said, with all her young dignity vibrant, that she

hoped his marriage would make no difference in their business relationships.

"I have come to rely upon you," she went on, and smiled condescendingly, or, at least, he read that small forced smile as condescending.

He replied soberly that he was glad of it.

"You will not abandon Marley—or me?" she added, more naturally.

"Marley and you will always be my first interest."

It was true. Andrew McKay married, making his wife a good and affectionate husband. But Agatha Wanstead was his first and only love. No one ever saw her with the same eyes as he did. After his marriage, and notwithstanding his loyalty to his wife, they grew in intimacy and understanding. He was lawyer to the estate, and spent much time in repairing her mistakes.

CHAPTER II

THERE are Great Marley, and Little Marley, and Marley of the Woods. In the first, strikingly incongruous with the new shops and houses, the bank and the brewery, the red brick town hall and adjacent police station, there stands, together with an ivy-grown parsonage of questionable date, the famous old church that attracts tourists and sightseers from all parts of the world. The church, with its frescoes and stained-glass windows, its monuments and brasses, the chancel dated 1519, the screen and christening font, was "restored" in the year 1794. Time has hallowed these restorations. A monument by Nollekens to the memory of "Hannah Wanstead and her nine children," and a medallion by Flaxman, compete now in interest with the sixteenth century brasses.

From the old church, leaving the new town behind, is the beautiful walk to Little Marley, through the natural avenue of wych elms, their huge trunks spreading from a single stem, umbrageous and cool in the summer, weird and wonderful in the winter. Little Marley is hardly more than a hamlet, a single street of thatched, half-timbered cottages, with a stream running along one side of it, a stream that eventually winds its way back to the Thames.

Beyond the gorse-clad hills lies Marley Chase, three separate woods, where high amid the encompassing pines the old house shows, E-shaped and grey, as when James I. was king.

Here, as piously as modern conditions allow, Agatha Wanstead prepared to sustain the feudal traditions for the sake of which she had rejected Andrew McKay.

In Great Marley she had some small property, besides the family brasses in the old church. Little Marley and "Marley of the Woods" were her own, together with a few outlying farms and the Chase.

In the management of this estate during the years that followed her rejection of Andrew she made every mistake that is possible to feminine ignorance and inexperience. She built elaborate model cottages that no workman would occupy, established a system of drainage at Little Marley for which there was no outlet, was sympathetic and indulgent to bad tenants, and bent on forcing the good ones to new and costly agricultural experiments. She was at first unpopular with her neighbours, but when they understood the motives that actuated her, the most intelligent amongst them forgave her methods. She made good and even enthusiastic friends. Colonel and Mrs. Metherby, for instance, who lamented her independence; the vicar and his wife, who realised her generosity; Sir John Campden's wife, who was perhaps grateful to her for having refused him, and Dr. Reid.

Outwardly, at least, as the years progressed she appeared satisfied with the conditions under which she lived. There was nothing too great or too small for her restless energies. To all the household of the Court, outside and inside, she was an exacting but considerate mistress. In Little Marley she was Lady Paramount, dispensing beef tea, blankets, bibles, advice. She told herself often that she had been right in refusing to marry, that she needed no husband; her life was full. And she learned her work, repairing her mistakes when they were brought home to her, always self-conscious but never self-satisfied.

With the land it was comparatively easy, although expensive. Sanders was a canny Scotsman. When he thought she might be right he followed her instructions; at other times he followed his own. The orchids, therefore, continued to flourish after Squire Wanstead's death, winning prizes still in London and at all the local shows. Agatha pursued her father's hobby at first from a sense of duty, but presently she fell under the fascination of the exotic blooms. That was the most dangerous time, but Sanders won through, making only permissible experiments.

She learned to manage Marley and the orchids, but Monica, her little wayward stepsister Monica, who was her

only relative and greatest responsibility, she never learned to manage.

Agatha, when she was little more than thirty, dressed as if she were fifty, and had few apparent feminine weaknesses or tendernesses. Yet, for all her certainty that the Wanstead tradition and reinstatement of the ancient glories of Marley were enough to fill any young woman's life, Nature taught her differently.

Monica, for instance, found a dozen chinks in her armour, and was always creeping through.

The real truth was that this shy and enigmatic young woman, who had thrown away her chances of happiness through reserve and supersensitiveness, pride and indefinite feminine unreasonableness, felt her heart growing when the time for other growth had passed. Conscience and conscientiousness were there, water-logging and clogging it. But there was also this inconsistent weakness.

Before Andrew's marriage the child and her duty towards her had been one of the excuses she made to herself for having rejected him. And after Andrew's marriage she came to believe it true. Monica was coaxing, a little sly, not straightforward and truthful like herself. She was often troubled by her, but her love grew as she felt the child's need. Nurse and the household watched and said, "Miss Monica has the length of her sister's foot—can wheedle her." But Agatha felt in the wheedling and little crooked ways a continual appeal.

The child was idle and averse to lessons; when she was nine years old she could neither read nor write.

"I wonder you are not ashamed," Agatha said to her, when the governess came to her in despair, complaining of persistent idleness.

"I *am* ashamed, sister."

Monica came nearer, caught hold of her hand. "Don't be angry with me. I only want to be with you."

"Will you try and learn if I give you your lessons?"

"I am sure I could learn if you taught me."

And they began the very next day. This was in the

seventies, and the higher education of women only in its infancy. The first thing Agatha tried to teach her little sister was to count.

"You will have to help me with the accounts of the estate when you grow up."

"I shall like that."

"Well, we will begin with the tables. Repeat the figures after me. Twice one are two."

Monica repeated them obediently, and up to twice five are ten.

Agatha was proud of her success, praising her.

"You will soon be quite a scholar. Twice six?"

"May I sit on your lap?"

"Not now. This is lesson time."

"If it was my own mother teaching me, she would let me rest on her lap," Monica said plaintively.

"Not in lesson time," Agatha repeated.

"My head aches so."

"It would ache no less if you were sitting on my lap."

"I believe it would. I love sitting on your lap."

"Not now."

"When I had the measles you took me on your lap."

"When you have the measles I will again. Go on. Twice six are twelve."

Monica began to cry.

"I wish I had a mother all my own, like other little girls. Janey Reid's mother nurses her all day."

The tables went on. So did the tears. And when twice six had been acquired it appeared that twice two had been forgotten. Agatha, so conscientious and strict when superintending the village school, could not bear to hear this child cry. Monica knew it; also that her stepsister winced when she spoke of other little girls with mothers of their own. Agatha was never without the remorseful remembrance that her father thought it was she who was responsible for her little sister being without a mother. She wavered and said:

"If you really think you would do better——"

Monica climbed quickly to her knee. A woman as any

other, although reluctant to her womanhood, Agatha liked the little form upon her knee and the curly, satisfied head against her breast.

"You really are a very naughty girl."

"But you'll always love me, whatever I do?"

"Nobody can love an ignoramus."

Monica's tears broke out again.

"What are you crying for now?" But her arms tightened involuntarily.

"Because you won't love me if I can't learn my tables, and my head does ache so when I try. And there's only you and me."

This was a plea Agatha could not withstand. It was so true. This little girl was all she had to make a home of what was otherwise only an estate. She held her more closely, dried her tears, said crossly, of course, she would always love her, whatever she did or left undone.

Already Agatha saw the spectre of loneliness, for all her independence. Whether she admitted it or not, she knew she had made a mistake. She was not meanly jealous of Andrew, with his wife and children, or the Campdens with theirs, but she had a sudden pang sometimes when she saw them. She never thought of herself as a wife, but often as a mother. And then it seemed to her that Monica was her own. More and more she came to think it as the years went on. The child required care, was exacting, and would have no tendance but her sister's. Agatha's thoughts and ambitions, once the estate was in order, began to concentrate on the girl. Of course she spoiled her, taking her love speeches very seriously, regretting her own strange inability to respond in words as warm; mothering her, not too wisely, perhaps, but with all her heart engaged.

"You will learn to do everything I do, and to keep up all the traditions of Marley. Marley will be yours one day," she told Monica often, endeavouring to interest her in the village, now become a model, and her many charities at Great Marley.

Thus, when fortune flung another opportunity to her, she

seemed too deeply committed to take it. She said she had given the girl her promise; Monica was to be the heiress of Marley. It was of Monica's marriage and not her own she was thinking when Andrew came to her again.

"You said 'no' to me fourteen years ago," he reminded her. "I don't suppose you like me any better now that I'm grizzled and have three children."

"It is no question of liking." She had foreseen ever since his wife died that he would reopen the question. She could not deny, even to herself, that she was glad of his freedom, glad she need not think of him with another woman. She believed, nevertheless, that it was only his friendship she prized. "I have always liked you."

"Will you marry me now?" he asked a little bluntly. "Marriage is the only life for a woman."

He knew now no better than before how to woo her.

"I have been very content."

"That is because you have known no better."

"Marriage has no attraction for me," she faltered, perhaps disingenuously.

"That is your ignorance. You don't like marriage because you don't know it. Try it with me. Aren't you lonely sometimes?"

"I have always Monica. No, I don't think I'm lonely." There was something staid and sedate about her, and yet remote, reserve was what the world called it, but it was more than that.

"Never distrustful of yourself or your capacity to stand alone?"

"I should not be less distrustful of myself if I said 'yes' to-day, after having said 'no' fourteen years ago. And I am too old to change now, too fixed in my habits."

"You'll never be too old. You'll die young enough still to believe that Marley could not exist without a Wanstead at her Court. Men and women were never made to live alone; haven't you found that out yet? There is everything in favour of a marriage between us, and nothing against it. I don't know you any better than I did, for I always knew you

through and through. I can't woo you passionately, we've passed that age."

He had, perhaps; for her it had never dawned. Yet she was curiously wounded by his tone and strengthened in her resolve.

"It is quite impossible," she said, and added quickly, "You say yourself you have outgrown your feeling for me."

Before he had time to grasp her meaning or realise what lay beneath it she went on even more hurriedly:

"I have so many interests; I know every cottage on the estate, every villager."

"I know as much of Marley as you do. We'll come down as often as you like. London is not in my blood as it is with some people. I have a good business, but I'll give it up if you ask me; I can afford to do so. On Campden Hill I have a house I care for almost as much as you love Marley, but that shall never be put before my liking for you. Be honest with me. What is standing between us?"

"I will tell you the truth." She flushed in telling it, for though it was the truth it was not the whole truth. "No one, not even you, could be to me what Monica is. And she depends on me. I will not put anything between us. I mean her to have Marley. I owe it to her."

"There need be nothing to prevent Monica inheriting Marley," he said dryly.

"It is possible that I might——"

And then she broke off, her cheeks crimsoning for all her thirty-seven years. Andrew's eyes were whimsical.

"Of course you might."

"But it was not only that," she went on, hoping to conceal her embarrassment with rapid talk. "In a way I have given her my promise."

"You owe her nothing. It is she who is in your debt. You are the most generous and least selfish of women, but you are obstinate and not very wise for all your intelligence. Perhaps that is why I care for you so much. There might have been an epidemic of typhoid, and there wasn't. That's the beginning and end of what you are blaming yourself for. You say yourself that Monica's mother was delicate. You

were not responsible for that, I suppose? You are sacrificing yourself for an idea."

"I am not sacrificing myself."

"That is all you know. You don't realise what sort of a husband I should make you."

"I don't want to know," she said hastily, surprised to find him all at once so near her.

"Don't you? Don't you? Then how wrong you are." She shrank back from him.

"It is too late; I am too old; I have outgrown the time for marriage," were the phrases with which she defended herself. Never dreaming what the future held for her, nor how she would blunder into the estate she had said so often was not for her.

He told her again that she was obstinate, but only succeeded in confirming her in it.

"Have it your own way then," he said in the end, almost irritably, but his irritability was due to his disappointment. "I can't compel you to marry me, although I know it would be a good thing for both of us. You are building on a quicksand if you are reckoning on ending your days here with that girl. Isn't she to marry either? You are so young, for all your years, that when you talk of the future it seems to you so far off that it's not worth reckoning with. You and your Monica! Two old maids together, opening bazaars; the Misses Wanstead, of Marley!" He was angry, or he would not have spoken like that. He had come here to-day full of hope, and was going away without any. "I don't know where your sense has got to. And what after—what after? Is Monica to have a husband, and is he to live here with you?"

"If she marries suitably. This is her home."

"I've no words for your foolishness." He was too exasperated for courtesy.

Afterwards, and not very long afterwards, both knew that there had been indeed no words to characterise her folly.

Andrew was sent away again to bring up his babies as best he might. Agatha persisted that Monica was all the children she would ever have.

She was not unconscious of what she was giving up, but was of a nature to whom sacrifice came naturally. The more she gave up for Monica the more she cared for her. It was true, as Andrew said, that the future and Monica's marriage seemed very far off and hazy.

At seventeen Monica was very pretty and very light, and although she loved her elder sister as well as she was capable of loving anybody but herself, she had a half-contemptuous pity for her because she was an old maid. Every man who came to the Court, young or old, and in whatever station of life, was Monica's admirer. Monica demanded admiration and received it. She had a way of looking up from under her lids, and of smiling. Agatha was uneasy about her, although she understood her so little. The very word flirtatiousness was unknown to Agatha, but she had her standard of good manners. She thought there was something a little vulgar or unworthy about Monica's pleasure in compliments and her way of receiving and talking about them. Monica, on the other hand, deemed her elder sister a little prudish, a little priggish, old-maidish, and found it difficult to keep her opinion to herself. Finally Agatha made up her mind, but not without mature and anxious thought, that until the day came for the girl to be presented, to take her place in Society, by which time she might have acquired decorousness and the knowledge of what was expected of a Miss Wanstead, of Marley, she must no longer be allowed to appear at dinner or garden party; she must be kept in the background. She was a little too old and a little too young to be with grown-up people, lacking dignity, almost decorum.

Monica was furious at being told she was to be banished to the nursery or schoolroom, deeply resentful of the slightest remonstrance as to her behaviour. Yet Agatha, so outspoken, frank and almost curt with the rest of the world, was gentleness itself with this wayward one. But for a short time, and until Monica learnt to evade her restrictions, relations were strained between them, and nothing Agatha yielded availed to put them right.

CHAPTER III

IN her eighteenth year, with the least possible excuse, Monica the cherished, the spoiled, the girl for whose sake Agatha had refused Andrew for the second time and turned her back on personal happiness, ran away from home, from the Marley that was to have been her life work and inheritance. Basil Fellowes was the companion of her flight, a son of the bank manager at Great Marley, a young fellow of twenty, recently gazetted second lieutenant in a line regiment. Agatha scarcely knew his name.

The girl was missed at lunch-time; by four o'clock in the afternoon the whole household was in alarm. If anyone guessed the truth no one told it, and Agatha would never have believed it. All night they sought for her; they searched the Chase and dragged the river. Agatha, imagining every disaster but the real one, distracted and beyond reason, sent in the end for Andrew, although she had averred so often that she needed no man's arm on which to lean.

Andrew's coming synchronised with Monica's belated telegram. Of course, he triumphed at seeing his predictions come true. And Agatha was so wounded, so hurt in all her pride as well as in her hidden tenderness, that his triumph, his smiles, and his "What did I tell you?" drove her mad with pain. She must have been mad in the months that followed; nothing else can account for her actions. Andrew saw Monica's letter, smiling at that too. He still wanted Agatha, and Monica's flight seemed to deliver her into his hands.

"DARLING SISTER,

"Don't be angrier with me than you can help. I wanted to tell you, but I knew you wouldn't understand. Basil and I are simply mad about each other. And you've never had

a love affair at all, nor been mad about anybody. Basil is sure his father will make him an allowance if you'll do the same and see him for us. We used to meet in the Chase. I've only known him six weeks altogether. I wanted to tell you ever so many times, but you think such a lot of birth and that sort of thing, I knew you wouldn't hear of my getting married until I was eighteen, and neither Basil nor I felt we could wait. At first we thought we'd just get married and come back home, and tell no one until his two years in India were over. He's got to go there next month. But after we were married and had lunch—I want to tell you everything, but, of course, you've never been married and I don't suppose I could make you understand—we simply couldn't be parted. I know you'll think we might have waited. . . .”

There were incoherent pages of excuses, but no word to show she knew what she had done.

Agatha did not reason about it at all, she was too greatly hurt. Andrew's tender triumph—he meant to be tender with her—was like a blow on the head after concussion of the brain, unbearable.

“You made a mistake, that was all,” said Andrew consolingly. “You mustn't take it too much to heart; the girl was never worthy of all you lavished on her.” He wanted to comfort her, and was ready to show her how to fill her life afresh.

Friends came in sympathy or surprise, in condolence or condemnation; it was impossible to hush the matter up. One said the girl had had too much freedom; another said she had had too little. Agatha was accused of having spoiled her, and then told she had been too austere. Everybody was sorry for her, but some of her friends blamed her and said or implied that the girl had been brought up badly.

The time came when Agatha found herself unable any longer to bear her neighbours' criticism or comment, Andrew's gentleness and triumph, or her own thoughts in solitary hours. Later on she might be able to face it, but not now.

She saw all her mistakes so much more clearly than they

did. But it was not her conscience that suffered, it was her heart. She had thought that Monica loved her, could not do without her. But in the watches of the night it seemed that no one loved or needed her. And she was nearing forty, inconceivably lonely, too old to reconstruct her life. Who now was to inherit Marley? Not the bank manager's grandchildren. She hardly knew her own next of kin, but must make search.

Andrew, for her own good and because he could not bear to see her look so unhappy and forlorn, chaffed her about the girl's flight, took it for granted that now she would listen to reason—what he called reason. Not even Andrew realised her sensitiveness, nor exactly how she was hurt. Often the girl had slept by her side; always her heart had been full of her. She had been bent on her welfare, planning for her. Not a day or a night could she remember for all the years since her father died that she had not planned for Monica or Marley. Never a selfish thought had come to her. People called her proud, standoffish. Perhaps that is how Monica regarded her. Love words had come to her with difficulty; but she had held this little sister in her arms and against her breast, denying her nothing. It was a psychological time with Agatha, and she saw youth behind her and loneliness in front—loneliness, or Andrew telling her of her many mistakes.

There were hours when she had an immense antagonism toward Andrew, when he seemed an enemy to her, glad of her pain. She had the sense to see she must get away from him, from all her surroundings, until she was in better humour.

Round and ridiculous in figure, ill-dressed always, and intermittently philanthropic, Alice Metheryby had nevertheless the human touch. She was in London when she heard what had happened at Marley Court.

"Come to us for a few weeks," she wrote to Agatha; "it will be a complete change for you; the Colonel and I will be so pleased to have you. You've never been in London during the season, and there will be nothing to remind you of anything you want to forget. You can be as quiet as you like, or as gay. The great thing is that everything will be different."

The great thing was that everything would be different. *How* different she never dreamed. She felt she must get away from Marley, from Andrew's weekly visits and proprietorial air, from the house that echoed no longer to the child's pattering feet, to the girl's chatter or wayward affection, away from the woods where she must walk alone, and from all the associations.

She drew a long breath when she was in the train, and thought that now the pressure on her head and heart would lighten, her brain would grow clear again. She would make new plans.

Andrew was satisfied that Agatha should be in London for a time. He thought it best for her to have a change of scene. The distance between Eaton Square and Campden Hill was not unsurpassable. Colonel Metheryby was the best of good fellows, the youngest colonel in the British army, with Afghan medals and reputation. She would see people, get used to being without the girl, come to a different way of thinking about things. Andrew was ever an optimist; he saw Agatha and himself together, and the wedding bells ringing. It was time his children had someone to look after them; Agatha would soon find her life full again. So he argued, and, although the distance from Campden Hill to Eaton Square proved longer than he expected, he lived in his fool's paradise until half the season had gone by.

Campden Hill and Eaton Square are only twenty minutes apart as the cab flies, but there was a whole quarter of social circumstance between them. The Metherbys lived in one set, Andrew McKay in another. They could have managed to meet, of course, but Agatha had no inclination to meet Andrew.

In London she got a little outside her pain, the pain of failure and loneliness; she went to receptions and dinner-parties and theatres, made new acquaintances and renewed old ones, talked more than she had ever done before, and with authority, perhaps gave a false impression of importance, making somewhat of a figure. In those days it was a little uncommon that a woman should talk freely and well of agri-

cultural conditions and farming, the labourer and his housing. She talked from the standpoint of experience. The tale of her wealth grew, and the number of her acres. Although she was in her fortieth year she looked younger; her hair was thick and abundant, her eyes were unwrinkled, her complexion was clear. Her fine hands and arched instep were hereditary, and she carried herself as a Miss Wanstead of Marley should.

It was the Hon. Mrs. Dacre who first conceived the idea, Lord Grindelay's sister. Lord Grindelay was the talk of London that season, and his sister was half proud and half ashamed of him, knowing more than the world knew.

In London, early in the July of that year, there was political talk that no woman in the Metherby world could hope to escape. There were fierce party cries and disruption, partisanship and appeal to national passions and possessions. It was the year when Parnell was fighting with his life's blood for a country that threw him aside like a dead dog on the first trivial excuse. It was a year of aggressions by the Land Leaguers, of maiming of cattle and murder of land agents.

The Lockhara incident will not have been forgotten, although the feeling it aroused is perhaps difficult to recall. Ulster then, as now, was steady and staunch. There was a meeting of Land Leaguers advertised for a certain date, and a manifesto headed "God Save the Queen" was issued by Lord Grindelay, of Languedoc, asking Orangemen and Loyalists to prevent it taking place. The two processions started, came into conflict at Lockhara, and there was some loss of life. There was a great outcry in London and in Dublin as to who was responsible, and to satisfy a section of the voters at Westminster it was Lord Grindelay who was finally indicted. The trial was several times postponed, and Lord Grindelay became the hero of the hour. He may have been a patriot and a hero, but that he was also a scamp who loved a row was well known to his sister and her intimates. Also that he could hardly afford to defend himself.

Agatha Wanstead was not aggressively religious, but she went regularly to her parish church, and hated Roman Cath-

olicism traditionally and instinctively. Loyalty to the Crown was part of the family history of the Wansteads, and since the Restoration they had never swerved from their Protestantism. This excuses, if it does not explain, Agatha's interest in the man who was ready to face imprisonment or impeachment in defence of either.

It does not explain all her blunder, although perhaps the beginning of it.

For the rest, there was the reasonless reaction from Andrew, who had predicted her betrayal and now showed his readiness to take advantage of it.

"I told you so. Foolish creature, dear foolish creature, I have told you so often you needed someone to take care of you. For the future I will do it. You have no excuse now for not placing yourself in my hands. I don't care for you as I did when you were a girl, but I will look after you. . . ."

These were the things Agatha heard Andrew say, resenting them in the watches of the night, always.

Lord Grindelay was then fifty, his hair still curly and his eyes blue. There was no doubt he was a favourite at Court, and that his misdemeanour made no difference as to his reception at Marlborough House. Dinah Dacre exploited his popularity for all and more than it was worth. He went everywhere, and, of course, to the Metherbys. It was in the brougham, after a dinner-party there, that the great idea struck Dinah. She hit him on the back and said:

"That woman with the short hair, now, Agatha, they called her, she that talked about loyalty; she's as rich as Croesus, they tell me. Why don't you go in for her?" She doubled herself up with laughter at the idea. "She thinks you are a hero, that you marched those poor devils to Lockhara for the Queen and country. She told me any one of her own people would have done the same."

"You think she took a fancy to me? Did she like me singing?"

Pat could sing Irish ballads, besides other songs, but he sang only Irish ballads at the Metherby dinner-party.

"Of course she did, for all that she's an old maid; a nice

creature, too. They'll be making you bankrupt, you know, and what will become of you then?"

"And is it love-making I'm to be at with an old maid?"

Lord Grindelay was apt with his Irish phraseology, and he said one or two things about old maids, in the brogue, that made Dinah laugh. He had buried his first wife long enough to have forgotten how unfit he was for matrimonial ties.

Dinah Dacre's sense of humour started the scheme, Pat's vanity made it feasible, the utter incongruity of such a match presently made them all keen for the fun of it. His family and his Irish friends applauded and urged him on. Most of them knew the inconvenience of perpetual bankruptcy. Even Royalty was understood to express an amused approval.

Pat rushed at his love-making, carrying Agatha off her feet. At first his wooing was half in fun, just to show what he could do and to amuse Dinah. He was told that the rent roll of Marley was large enough to flood the depleted exchequer of Languedoc.

"It's a great wife she'll make me," he said, with his tongue in his cheek. "She'll believe every word I say." And he told of stories she had swallowed whole.

It was true that Agatha believed everything he said. With all her disappointment, she was ever conscious of her position, and could not conceive that anyone should make fun of her. She was a new and strange specimen of humanity to the wild Irish peer, who had not known women with a rare sense of duty and none of humour.

For the moment Agatha's reasoning powers were at their lowest ebb. Pain had always that effect on her reasoning powers, as the strange sequel to her story proved. Now she was all unused to it. She wanted to get away from herself and all her associations, to reconstruct her life. There could not be a greater change than this gay Irishman, who had made every sacrifice for his country and bore his position lightly. His lightness and gaiety were so strange to her; they were not among the characteristics of her Buckinghamshire neighbours. Yet her engagement came upon her as a surprise; he kissed her without asking her leave, and said she

was "the girl for him" before she had time to assert her dignity.

"Begod! she didn't know whether she was standing on her head or her heels," Pat told his sister. "A few kisses carried her away. She came fresh to it, too, an' you'd think she was seventeen from her blushing. I'll be tied up before I know where I am; an' what'll I do with her, God knows, for she thinks I'm a saint an' a hero, an' I'll have to be on me best behaviour all the time."

The Metherbys were hypnotised by Pat's *bonhomie*. Young Lady Dorset had a great weakness for her uncle, and told Agatha what a fine shot he was, and what a great rider, and how kind he had been to her and her brother when they were children. Agatha's generosity, no less than her impulsiveness, helped to her undoing. The inquest on the Lockhara victims was adjourned and adjourned again. Lord Grindelay's trial was yet to come.

"I'll not have you make any promise until they've found whether I'm a murderer or not. Maybe I was responsible for those poor fellows' deaths, and not the murdering Land Leaguers at all."

Agatha was not the woman to wait until he was in safety.

On July 27, 1878, without settlements or public announcement, at St. George's, Hanover Square, in the presence of the Metherbys and a whole crowd of Irish relatives of the bridegroom, the amazing marriage took place. Andrew knew nothing about it until it was all over, and he saw it chronicled in the *Morning Post*.

"On the 27th inst., at St. George's, Hanover Square, by the Right Rev. Bishop of Bath and Wells, assisted by the Rev. Septimus Black, Patrick Canning Warner Foulds, Lord Grindelay, of Languedoc Castle, co. Fermanagh, Ireland, to Agatha, elder daughter of the late Archibald Wanstead, of Marley Court, Bucks."

He could not believe it at first, although it stared at him in solid print. Agatha married—*Agatha!* And not to him! He knew at once what a bad mistake she had made, and how

characteristic. He blamed himself then and often for his patience with her. He went about for many days with a heavy heart. She was so sure of her strength, yet no woman of his acquaintance was more in need of a man to guide her; and that he should have been the man he had no doubt. When, for Agatha's sake, he began to collate facts about Lord Grindelay and to learn his reputation, his heart grew heavier still. He knew she had blundered again, badly, irretrievably.

At her own home in Marley, and in Buckinghamshire generally, when they read the announcement, they thought she had done very well for herself, very well indeed.

"She must be forty if she's a day, and no beauty at any time. And she has married a peer!" In Buckinghamshire in 1878 they still thought something of a peer, and the fact that Agatha would go in to dinner before Lady Campden.

As for Agatha herself, during those few days before her hurried wedding, and even on her wedding day, she thought of nothing but that she need not go back yet to the grey, silent house, to find herself without the footfall beside her own, or the girlish laughter in her ears, to be haunted by thin arms about her and light kisses on her cheek. She need not return so soon to the sympathy of the neighbours and the talk of the villagers. She was starting on a new life with a man who adored her; a good man, too, who had served his country and stood even now in peril for the cause. She could help him in his campaign, share his danger, find a whole new set of interests. She even thought vaguely that she might give up Marley and make Ireland her home. She would do anything to save herself remembering how Monica had deceived and run away from her and Andrew McKay been justified in his prognostications.

CHAPTER IV

THE Ireland in which Agatha pictured herself making a new home was the Ireland of the new Celtic movement, of Clarence Mangan, and Aubrey de Vere, of William Allingham, and Sir Samuel Ferguson. The Ireland in which she found herself was that of Lever's novels. Languedoc was "Castle Rackrent," but without any quality of romance. She might have got over that if her husband, if this good man to whom she had tied herself, this impetuous lover to whose adoration she had succumbed, had remained on the good behaviour he had promised his sister, until at least she had acclimatised herself.

As it was, within a week, the dirt and the debt and the disorder seemed no less part of him than of his castle. To say he shocked her delicacy every hour she passed with him in the familiarity of married life is to gloze over the truth. She knew, as soon as she knew anything at all, into what a morass she had stepped. "Morass" was the only description she could apply to Lord Grindelay's mind. She conceived an absolute horror of him before, according to his own way of thinking, he had done anything to deserve it. The stories he told her—and telling coarse stories was his idea of honeymoon entertainment—filled her with disgust. He jested with his servants, and she thought that he drank with them. Certainly he was on terms of boon companionship with the boorish neighbours who called upon her, who drove over in side-cars with their incredible womenkind.

The castle was three parts in ruin, and the very decencies of life were lacking in its furnishment. She made an honest effort to put things on a better footing. She did not give in all at once, nor for many a weary disgusted day. But when she would have introduced reforms she was met by an opposition of idleness and inertia, humour and stupidity that proved completely baffling.

"An' where'll the hot water be comin' from?" Biddy asked her with apparent curiosity. Lord Grindelay had told her it would be a mistake to bring an English maid with her, and that Biddy or any of the servants would be glad to wait upon her. Biddy's own position in the house was never explained. There seemed to be dozens of servants, no one of them with defined duties. A greater change from her own ordered English household it was impossible to conceive.

"Is it a bath yer wantin'? Sorra fut, but it's in England ye ought to have stayed. I'll get ye a can of water, maybe, but not at the early hour ye name. What! an' will ye be after washin' yesilf all over, an' you wid never a spot on ye that anyone can see?"

"Is it yer dress I'm to fasten behint, an' me wid me hands shakin' from carryin' up that great can?"

Larry, who was Pat's body servant, and Biddy, who was possibly the housekeeper, had a way of wondering open-mouthed at her requirements—admiring and wondering.

"It's the gas ye have at home, an' the gutterin' candles'll be lavin' yez in the dark. I'm tellin' ye we're lucky to git them candles, forbye they're the same Father Ralph uses."

"Clanin' the room ivry day are ye manin', an' wid visitors comin' an' all?"

"It's the cookin' ye're not satisfied wid, an' didn't Norah kill the best fowls in the run with her own hands, barrin' one that was a cock, an' that not an hour since? 'Anythin' to plaze ye,' she said. Tough was it they were? Maybe ye're right, but she's a grand cook for all that, an' her own mother's cousin an O'Donoghue."

Soon she found herself confronted by an ever-growing, although subtle and unexpressed, opposition. Her manner towards Lord Grindelay, her obvious distaste of his coarse joviality, aroused their antagonism. Agatha could not disguise her feelings, there was not an hour of the day or a circumstance of her present life in which they were not outraged.

"It's a squeamish old maid ye are," her husband said to her within a week of their marriage. He still treated her

with good-humour, and laughed at her flushed remonstrances. But the time came when she irritated him. He was not used to criticism, and if she resented his jesting with the servants or drinking more whisky than was good for him, he would retort: "Sure a man's master in his own house? As for Biddy, Biddy was there before you were, wasn't she? And what if I did chuck a colleen under the chin or pass her a kiss? Do you think you're the soft companion for a man, that he'd be looking the other way when a pretty wench came in sight?"

Things grew worse between them very quickly. Agatha was horrified to hear that there had never been any real fear of Lord Grindelay's trial for manslaughter, and that he had only used it as a lever to hurry on the marriage. He thought nothing of the deception he had practised upon her, nothing of telling lies, or drinking too much whisky, or philandering with the maids. He subjected her to every possible indignity. So she said when the inevitable end came. He never saw that she had anything against him but her own want of adaptability. "Didn't he live the life of every Irish gentleman of his own age and standing?" he asked. If he did, Agatha thought it was a dreadful thing for Ireland, and accounted for the lack of prosperity. She felt the humiliation of the conditions under which she was placed, was too intelligent, when once her reasoning powers returned, not to realise them, and too intolerant to submit. Her high rectitude and aloofness helped to her ever-growing unpopularity. She imported English servants, and neither they nor she could obtain service in Languedoc. More than once she threatened to leave. But for a few months her strong sense of duty kept her from carrying out her threat.

When, however, she found she was about to become a mother she knew she could not face what was before her in such surroundings. To separate herself for a time at least from Lord Grindelay became imperative. He let her go without any opposition. None of her ways or talk suited him, and he told his friends that he was glad "to see the back of her." The marriage was a complete failure. He com-

plained that Dinah had landed him with a wife who would not even sign cheques without exacting absurd promises. Promises, however, that were broken as easily as made. Before the end came she would not sign cheques for him at all. He called her mean, although never had there been a woman more generous. But she was essentially just. The tradesmen for whom she had written cheques, poor men who ought not to have been left without their due, came again lamenting that nothing had been given to them. She never arrived at the smallest comprehension of Lord Grindelay's ways or his carelessness in money matters. To her he was simply a dishonest person.

At Marley, back again into the atmosphere of respect, esteem, ordered ways and appreciation, back to her position as Lady Paramount and Lady Bountiful, she found no haunting ghost of Monica in wait for her, but only her renewed sense of personal dignity and high position. Very quickly she recovered her equipoise. The future must be faced, of course. She knew already that she could never return to Ireland or to Lord Grindelay, although it was not necessary all the world should be informed of it.

Lady Grindelay kept her own counsel perhaps too well, and it was Dr. Reid who, later on, took the responsibility of telegraphing for her husband. She was not young; he anticipated trouble, and thought her husband should be there. Dr. Reid practised in Great Marley, where it was the custom for husbands to be within call on such occasions, particularly with a first baby. This was to be more than a baby; it was to be an heir.

Lord Grindelay came at the call. The end of the hunting season left him with time on his hands, and his irritation against his wife subsided. He was the easiest of men to live with if one did not question his ways. He said so himself, therefore it must have been true.

In his cups, the night his son was born, he hiccoughed it all out to Dr. Reid. He said "she was so damned particular, nagging me, wanting me to put things in order that never would be in order, never had been."

"She took against me, doctor; no reason or rhyme in it. Wasn't I attentive to my duty to her?" One can leave a little hiatus there in his talk. "Wouldn't I have kept her amused if there had been any spirit in her? I'm good company, doctor; there's not a soul but has always said so—you ask my sister Dinah. I'm good company, but not a thing could I say or do to please her. Me singing, now, wasn't it good enough for Marlborough House and the Prince? Stiff as buckram she is, more English than you'll find in London."

He trolled out a stave about a noble lord who had taken advantage of a serving wench:

'He sold her to his servant

An' he gave them twenty pound. . . .'

"The fuss she made about that song, and the moral of it—the moral of it! When it comes to talkin' of the moral of a good song!"

He had his grievances, but he was quite good-humoured over them, prepared to forgive her. He thought she would come to a better knowledge of his world in time. "It's a difficult thing, perhaps, for an old maid," he said in exculpation of her.

Dr. Reid already realised he had perhaps made a mistake in sending for Agatha's husband. When he came to tell him that he was the father of a son and heir, he found him asleep on the sofa, the whisky bottle empty.

Agatha's weary time of convalescence was diversified by stories of her husband's conduct. Any chance of reconciliation between them was lost by his behaviour. The neighbourhood, hearing Lord Grindelay was at Marley Court, and in accordance with precedent at such a time, called upon him and invited him to dinner. He got drunk in their houses, told his coarse stories, sang his coarse songs, was soon ostracised. He might have been accepted among sporting men or in a sporting neighbourhood, although he was so completely out of date. But among Agatha's friends he had no place at all. He was horribly bored, too, and took his revenge by shocking them, exaggerating his brogue and his stories. When he visited Agatha in her bedroom he upset the nurse and sent

up the temperature of her patient by recapitulating these exploits. It was difficult to keep him out of the sick-room, because, strangely enough, and to add to his many inconsistencies, he displayed great interest in his son. It was a red-faced baby with black hair, who screamed a great deal. Agatha was unable to nurse it, and it is possible it did not like the artificial food provided. On the rare occasions when it opened its eyes, they were seen to be blue, like Lord Grindelay's own.

"It's the livin' image of me," he said, almost awed. Agatha thought he spoke the truth. The child made no appeal to her. If it were possible for so dutiful a woman to be wanting in right feeling, one would have to admit that she disliked the child. She said once that "he screamed in Irish." But Lord Grindelay would dandle him on his knee, talking baby talk as to the manner born.

"We'll teach you to laugh, won't we, old man? Is it dribblin' you are, bad cess to you, though why you shouldn't dribble if you want to I'm sure I don't know. He's wonderfully strong, isn't he, nurse? Listen to the voice of him! There's lungs for you. He'll sing like his father, won't ye now, and have all the maids running after you?"

He could not help being reminiscent. Agatha dreaded him in her room, dreaded to hear him talk to the baby or the nurse, was always afraid of what he would say next, and doubting his complete sobriety.

Lord Grindelay had a way of rocking the baby in his arms, tossing and talking to him, that drove her almost distracted.

Once it was sick over his coat, bringing up that half-digested artificial milk. Even that failed to upset Lord Grindelay's good temper.

"Here, take him away and empty him, nurse. Bedad, but he's his father over again. I'll not think any the worse of him for that; he's had a drop more than he can keep down."

Agatha thought the incident quite disgusting; she was intolerant of both father and son.

The baby's christening kept Lord Grindelay at Marley.

Although it was against her wishes, in the end it was Lord Grindelay who chose the name. He had his rights, and so far as his son was concerned it appeared he meant to exercise them.

"He'll be Desmond O'Rourke Warner, like his grandfather."

"He should have my father's name."

"An' what might that be?"

"Archibald!"

"Archibald, now! To think of it! Is it Archibald he looks like, or Reginald? Is it an Englishman he is at all? Look at his eyes now, blue as me own, and the black hair of him. My mother was an O'Rourke, an' I'll give him her name and Desmond. There were Desmonds at Languedoc before the flood. It's only meself they called Patrick because my elder brother was alive when I was born, and we couldn't all be Desmonds."

She gave way to him. The baby was christened before it was a month old, for Agatha thought Lord Grindelay would go back to Languedoc or up to London when he had seen his wishes carried out. But he lingered on, disorganising her household, disturbing her peace. The baby allured him; there was never a day when he failed to ask of his progress, taking him from the cradle or the nurse's lap; he was very handy with him, more so than Agatha herself.

"We'll make a boxing man of him; see him doubling up his little fists?"

Agatha's convalescence was a long one, and, of course, Pat could not sit in her room all day, or with the baby. He was horribly bored at Marley, although pleased with the new sensation of fatherhood. He was really not half such a scoundrel as he appeared in Agatha's eyes. With a woman like his own sister Dinah, for instance, who would have laughed with him and drank with him, coaxed and rated him, understood and managed him, he might have been made into a tolerable semblance of a husband at this juncture. For he had always been fond of children, as they of him, and to have one of his own, this one, who held on to his thumb and began

to gurgle and wriggle and smile crookedly when he tickled or tossed him, almost made a new man of him. Almost, not quite.

He was over fifty and had been for years a toper. He could not sit all day long in his wife's bedroom playing with the baby; he had to find some entertainment for himself. There was a billiard table at the Court, but he preferred the one at the "King's Arms" in Great Marley, where his picturesque language drew a whole admiring company about him. He was extraordinarily popular at the "King's Arms," and with the London people who lived in the new villas at Great Marley; which, coming to the ears of his wife, made matters no better with her. To be popular with billiard-room loungers, tap-room loafers, and even the wives of stockbrokers, proud to entertain a peer, who was also the husband of one of the great local magnates, debased him further in Agatha's estimation. When she heard that he could tell a good story, she knew by experience that it was a bad one they meant. He said openly that her friends were "damned dull and too strait-laced for him!" He did unheard-of things, things unheard of, at least at Marley, inviting people to the Court to dine or drink with him who should have stood, hat in hand, in hall or library.

She and her pride suffered from him. It is certain that he was little more pleased with her. "To hell with changing my habits!" was the least of his refusals to see her point of view. They had no common ground on which to meet.

Although he had a certain insolence of rank, he had no sense of its duties or responsibilities. "Whatever he does, he is always a gentleman," said the admiring stockbrokers' wives to whom he made careless love in his cups. But to Agatha it seemed he was always a blackguard, and that her duty to herself, her neighbours, the estate and her son demanded that she should rid herself of him.

When she was well again, and went about the house and village, she found some of the conditions that prevailed at Languedoc were being reproduced in Marley. Certainly, Lord Grindelay was no example for a model village. Her troublesome conscience was brought to bear on the situation.

If she had made a mistake, others must not suffer. Lord Grindelay was a spendthrift in addition to all his other disabilities, and Marley, if not herself, must be protected. Fortunately, she had not put it out of her power to do this. She overcame her reluctance in the end and sent for Andrew.

Perhaps that was one of the worst moments in her life. His strong sense and warnings, his contempt and love for her, all he knew and all she had not forgotten, made a meeting between them under these new conditions fraught with humiliation. But it would be more impossible to talk to a stranger. Perhaps, too, she felt she had wronged Andrew, or that he was part of the Marley life to which she had returned.

When Andrew came at her summons he found the way to make things easy for her. He had gone through his own bad time and that may have taught him to assuage hers. The past might never have been; the tender or proprietorial air no longer existed. He presented himself now only as an old friend, a middle-aged lawyer here on business. He knew better than to sympathise with Agatha. In no time at all, and without a word to establish it, a new understanding was between them, and she could speak to him more plainly and undisguisedly than to anyone else.

What Andrew McKay thought of the position can be imagined, and his quick decision as to how it was to be met. Yet it was doubtful if he could have succeeded in extricating her but for the elderly scapegrace himself. It appeared that Lord Grindelay was quite willing to meet their views—would agree to a separation on terms. By this time Agatha was ready to give him almost any terms he asked, for the scandal was ever-growing, destroying her influence, making her a byword. She was so impatient that Andrew had much trouble to get a proper agreement drawn up. She would have sacrificed half her fortune to rid herself altogether of the merry Irishman with the roving eye. But divorce was out of the question, for he had neither deserted nor been legally cruel to her.

Lord Grindelay refused to give up his paternal rights. Andrew McKay had to meet his lawyers, to make concessions. And when he would make no further concessions,

counsel was consulted, and finally the matter went before a judge in chambers. There the Solomon-like judgment was pronounced that the custody of the child should be vested equally in mother and father. The boy was nearly a year old before this decision was arrived at, and already the dual ownership had offended and estranged the baby's mother. Lord Grindelay came backward and forward to Marley whilst the lawyers were at work. Perhaps this accounted for her accepting the decree.

Her acquiescence may also have owed something to the bad news from India that came to hand about the same time.

When once she recovered from the first shock of her anger, Agatha had found herself unable completely to repudiate the claims of her runaway step-sister. Marley was not entailed, but for generation after generation it had descended in the direct line. After her baby was born Agatha was the more sorry for Monica, because she had lost her inheritance. In fact, she had every excuse but the true one; the true one being that her little sister had stood so near her heart that she could trample upon it, and the footprints were ineradicably there.

And Monica, as if unconscious of her disloyalty or duplicity, had never ceased to write. Whether Agatha answered or not, she wrote.

"I wish I had never left Marley," was the beginning of one of these early letters. And after the first time she wrote it often and passionately. The marriage, of course, proved a failure. Two selfish young people, inconsiderate as these had proved themselves, living in a tropical climate, with limited means, soon found matrimony anything but an ideal state.

Agatha, after she had made her own inconceivable marriage, softened wonderfully toward the girl. She began to send her money, clothes, and sympathy. Did she not herself know how unhappy an unhappy marriage could be? Monica had been little more than a child when she made her mistake; she herself was nearly forty! She read of broken health, isolation in the dreadful up-station where Basil's regiment was quartered, the terrible home-sickness that was the

note of all the letters. The last one led to her precipitate action:

“DARLING SISTER,—I wish I could feel you forgave me. Always when I have my worst bouts of malaria, in the shivering stages, I feel that nothing but your arms could ever warm me. Do you recollect how often I used to come into your bed? I know I shall never see you again, and you can’t tell how I long for you. Do the trees still rustle in Marley Chase, and does the cool river run? I want the beeches and elms, and to hear the birds sing after rain. All the vegetation here seems hot and reeking of the natives. How I hate all their black faces and the smell of everything. I have had three disappointments. I don’t think I’ve ever been well for a day since I’ve been here. If this baby that is coming could have been born at Marley!

I had to put down my pen when I thought of it; the wide, welcoming hall, and you; the sunken garden where the violets grow. I want to lean against the old sundial, to see the leaden figure of Pan piping—I want the scent of the roses where we used to sit in the pergola and look upon the woods, where you told me stories of the dear dead Wansteads and their worth. I used to be bored with it then, and your seriousness about the family, but I wouldn’t be bored now with anything you said. If only I could hear your voice! Every day and hour, and desperately in the nights, I want you; your strength and courage. You don’t love me any more, do you? But I want you to be sorry for me, to forgive me. I don’t believe I’m going to live through it, I am dying of home-sickness. Be a little sorry for me.—Your loving, loving MONICA.”

This letter came when Agatha’s own baby was but a year or so old. She had not yet forgotten what she had gone through, even at Marley, in her large cool bedroom, from whose windows she could see those green and distant woods.

She had not yet forgotten what she had borne, with all the alleviations that money and modern science could give her.

She cabled that Monica was to come home at once; no expense was to be spared. She began to make preparations without delay. Already she saw herself caring for her; she would make the girl feel this was indeed home to which she had come. There must be no scene of reconciliation, but Monica should understand how welcome she was.

Her own baby had in no way replaced her sister's image. At present he was no more to her than a tempestuous child craving violent movement, of a sex toward which her inherent antipathy had deepened—the heir to Marley. Not at all like Monica, who had wheedled an irresistible way into her heart. He was something strange and alien, from which, if the whole truth were known, she shrank a little. With Monica it had always been so different. She gave orders which room was to be prepared, and even talked matters over with Dr. Reid.

The answering cable upset all her plans, distressed and disappointed her.

“Doctor forbids travel. Very grateful and lonely.”

“And lonely!”

It was those two words that did it. She was never at ease after that. She felt impelled to go, and this although her own freedom was not complete and the lawyers were still at work. Lord Grindelay carried his son off triumphantly to Languedoc when Agatha, hurrying through her preparations, went out to India. Biddy proved a better nurse to little Desmond than she had been a maid to his mother, but of this more presently.

Agatha went out to India, and up to that lonely station.

Monica's trembling impassioned greeting, tears and penitence, the way she clung to her as if she could never let her go again, broke down utterly in her arms, and said how incredible and impossible it was that she was here, and that she had never thought to see her again, and was dying for the need of her, made her captive again to the girl.

In India Agatha spent many weary months, fighting climate and a weakened constitution. In the end she was

worsted by Death. But her own courage came back to her during those months whilst she fought for her sister's life. And when she returned to Marley she had her last gift in her arms to anchor it.

"Take my baby back to Marley with you, be to her what you were to me, only that, sister. I know now, if I never knew before, that I deserve everything that has happened. I give you my baby for your own—for your very own. Love her for me as well as for yourself. Take care of her like you did me—promise, promise."

Dying lips cannot be denied. The promise was given, and kept rarely. If it was kept mistakenly, that is because it was ingrain in Agatha Wanstead to do the wrong thing.

CHAPTER V

AGATHA came back to Marley, bringing her sister's legacy with her. Basil Fellowes made no objection. Unlike Lord Grindelay, he had no feeling for children, nor had he much for anything else except "pegs" and polo. He was glad to be free, and never disputed Monica's right to give away that which belonged to them in common. Agatha brought the baby back to Marley, the small pale baby with an Indian ayah. It needed so much care and nursing, and was so fragile a blossom that more than once it seemed impossible it could survive the voyage. The more need it had of Agatha, the stronger became its claims; it was as if Monica herself had been restored to her.

When she reached home, to find her own young son not there, she almost forgot to miss him, to recall him.

Lord Grindelay did not carry out very honestly the contract into which he had entered. Neither he nor Biddy wanted to part with the boy, and when, at Andrew's instigation, Agatha insisted upon her rights, the pleasure proved very questionable. Biddy brought him over, and was almost as distracting to the household as Lord Grindelay himself. She quarrelled with Eunice's nurse, arguing the superiority of her own charge. Desmond had grown into a fine sturdy child, not much better-mannered than his nurse. He refused his mother's lap, walked about by himself, defied nursery authority, said his few words in the broadest of brogues. Biddy was so shrewd and volubly reticent that, to use the language of the servants' quarters, "no one could come out with her." When she went back, taking the little boy with her, it was a relief to everyone. By this time Agatha had settled down again. This little girl was so like the other little girl her father's death had left to her, that sometimes it seemed as if the pendulum had swung back and her youth had been restored to her.

But when Desmond was in his seventh year Andrew spoke seriously to her of her duty towards her son.

"He is having no education, running wild with the servants, and without any control. The other day, in Dublin, Lord Grindelay was heard to boast that, although his son was only seven, he could smoke a pipe without being sick, and 'drink his glass like a man!' You have your duty to him; you can't let things go!"

When Agatha knew her duty she did it, however reluctantly. Again she asserted her claim, and again Lord Grindelay complied unwillingly, taking his own measures to circumvent her.

"She'll get tired of you; she likes her own way, and mind you don't give it to her. Languedoc's your home, and don't you forget it! You're an Irishman, it's the fools of lawyers that send you to Marley. Make her sorry when she gets you there!"

The little boy he addressed was devoted to his father, like all of them at Languedoc. Lord Grindelay roared at his son's worst misdemeanours, and encouraged him in his naughtiest exploits. He had his own way in everything, possessed a pony, and even a gun. He was told that in England he would have none of these things, but would be expected to mind his "p's" and "q's," be on his best behaviour. Everything English was represented to him as implying restraint. He had his hints from Biddy and Larry as well as his instructions from his father, and these were all to the effect that he "wasn't to make them anxious to keep him."

This time Lady Grindelay had insisted the little boy was to come alone, without Biddy or her influence. She agreed with Andrew when he pointed out to her that she had to combat his father's influence and exert her own. Andrew spoke seriously. His own young Michael was a scholar of Winchester. Agatha's son must not be allowed to run wild any longer.

The boy came, and proved as amenable as a fox in a farmyard. He got into the stables, rode the horses without saddle or bridle or permission, ran riot in the garden and greenhouses, could not be brought to punctuality at meals, could not be coaxed or persuaded to cleanliness, while he generally

defied authority. This rough little fellow, with curly black hair and blue eyes, of whom one heard nothing but complaints, who used bad language, ran away at her approach, was nothing but a stranger in his mother's house. He was Lord Grindelay's son. If at this time Agatha had any love for him at all, the form it took was an unrest which she was for ever trying to subdue. Her conscience troubled her; she could never bring herself to punish, hardly even to admonish him; she felt there was something she had to make up to him; that it was not his fault he was as he was. She let him go with a groom to the local hunt, sent him up to London one day to see a circus, was half ashamed of herself for wanting to conciliate or win him, but made attempt after attempt.

Children have an instinctive sense of justice. This was not the mother little Desmond had been led to expect. There were things about her he could not help liking, although he tried to be loyal to his father. Already in his young groping way he was trying to reach to some knowledge of her. The position between them was strange; he was only a shy young animal, bolting at her approach, coming back to see what had alarmed him, sniffing the air about her. And Agatha was almost as uneasy as he.

All his wild childhood was difficult and distracted by his ignorance and lack of understanding of what lay between his parents. The law was to blame; the position was altogether untenable. After six months as Marley, Lord Grindelay demanded the boy back. But he had been at Languedoc five and a half years out of his seven, and Agatha would not let him go. In the rain of lawyer's letters the boy suddenly disappeared. In other words, Lord Grindelay, or his myrmidons, abducted him; he was battledoor and shuttlecock between his parents. Two long years passed before he was restored again to Marley.

All this time Eunice was outgrowing her delicacy, and developing beauty and charm. She was truly an exquisite little creature, with the sweetest nature; it had been impossible to spoil her. If she had not entirely taken Monica's place with Agatha, no one but Agatha guessed it.

Eunice was seven and Desmond was nine when the boy was again at Marley. Agatha spoke of him to Andrew, again a constant visitor and now her most intimate friend.

"I feel less able than before to influence him. The long interval since he was here has been used only to poison his mind against me. I don't know what is to be done."

The little girl was on Andrew's knee. He pulled her curls and asked her:

"What do you say, little maiden, is to be done with this young 'Struwwelpeter'? Shall we dip him in the ink?"

"We mustn't be cwel!" the little one answered gravely.

"Well, what are we to do with him if he won't do as he is told—if he *will* be a naughty boy?"

"We must love him and cuddle him, and then he'll be good," she said confidently, having known nothing but cuddling and the smallest of nursery peccadilloes.

"You hear that, Agatha? What do you think of the prescription?"

"She will have to do it herself, then," answered Agatha quickly, with a strangely rising flush. Andrew put the child down.

"Run and fetch him, I want to see him. We shall have to go to the court again, I expect," he said to Agatha. "You say he can barely read and write, and he's nearly nine years old! We shall have to get an order to send him to school."

"There isn't a decent school that would take him," Agatha answered, "nor keep him if they did take him. He is as ignorant as a peasant."

And yet with her bitterness was something that made Andrew look at her keenly.

"You care for him more than you know," he said. And with more truth than *he* knew.

* * * * *

To find Desmond and bring him into the drawing-room Eunice went to the edge of the wood, sending her voice before her.

"Desmond, Desmond! Where are you, Desmond?"

She knew most of his haunts; it is harder to keep children

apart than their elders know. He had not been encouraged in the nursery, for none of his ways were nursery ways, but he had been there all the same. Eunice knew all his haunts except a new one he had found only that afternoon, on the branch of a tree. Save that he became sorry for her searching, and because his heart was soft, although so few at Marley guessed it yet, she might never have discovered him.

"Silly Billy! Where's your eyes? I've been here all the time. What's up? What for are you wanting me?" he called out.

"Oh, Desmond, what a lovely new place!"

"Come along up; there's room for two!"

"Me!"

"Why not? You're afraid of tearing your muslin pinny. What a baby you are! And there's a hole in it already, so there!"

But there was no hole, it was white and immaculate as when she left the nursery. He knew how to tease her.

"Who wants me? What's afoot now? Aren't you coming up?"

"I don't know how."

"Don't know how!" he mimicked her. "Don't know how to climb a tree, don't know how to sit a horse, don't know how to drive him, or hold the reins, or set a ferret! Too nice, how nice, *Yewnice!* That's the way to say your silly name. 'Aren't you ashamed of being only a silly girl? Listen. I'll pretend I'm a thrush." He mimicked the long sweet note. "I'm coming down to help you up. Look out! I'm going to jump." He swung himself from the branch and dropped at her feet.

There were less than three years between them, and, of course, she thought him wonderful. She knew he was a rough boy, because Nurse said so, but there was no better companion, and he was never really rough with her. He knew everything about animals, could imitate birds, make the hares in the woods come to him.

"What do you want me for?" he asked when he stood beside her.

"Auntie wants you. Uncle Andrew's in the drawing-room and he wants you. You'll come, won't you?" For even she knew how difficult it was to get Desmond to come at a call.

She slipped her small hand confidently in his as he stood beside her.

"No; I shan't come. Why should I? He isn't my Uncle Andrew. I shall stay where I am."

"And auntie would like you to look your best. He hasn't seen you for such a long time," she coaxed.

"You'd be having me put on a velvet suit and a lace collar!" he scoffed.

"Just wash part of your hands." She was coaxing him, she did not mean to be funny, only to let him down easily.

"I'll race you from here to the end of the lawn; you can have three-quarters' start. I'll go in to the old gossoon if you get there first."

"And if I win, you'll wash?" She was quick to take advantage of the opening.

"That's for the seeing; it isn't you that'll be winning. Start now, and when you get to that copper beech you can run, I'll call out to you."

Long-legged, slender, her fair, well-tended curls floated behind her, she ran gracefully and swiftly. More stockily built, very little taller for all his additional years, he had over-handicapped himself, and reached the lawn a second later than she did. She was panting, out of breath, already almost sorry she had won.

"I believe I began to run before you said 'off!'" she said breathlessly.

He was annoyed, but not unfair.

"I'm going round by the stables. Say I'll be there in ten minutes."

She knew he would keep to the terms of the wager although he had not ratified it, and she went contentedly in search of Nurse, who would smooth her slightly disordered curls, adjust the blue bow, and remove the white pinafore in which there was no hole, uncovering the soft white frock of silk and Valenciennes lace. Agatha, who disguised her femininity in

tweeds, coats and skirts and felt hats of the masculine shape, spared nothing in Eunice's adornment. She was dressed like a young princess.

"It was too bad sending you after Master Desmond. I suppose he led you a dance?" Nurse grumbled.

"We had a race. And it's all right, he's gone up to dress. I liked racing with him, he gave me a long start."

Nurse kissed her; it was a way people had with Eunice. Not only because she was so fair and soft to kiss, but because even before she could reason she had the instinct to wish everyone to be happy. From the very first she had that gift of loving tact. Nurse must not feel her work had been wasted. Uncle Andrew would see Desmond in the drawing-room looking so that Auntie could be proud of him.

"If only he gets his parting straight!"

That was the thought in her little mind as she stood before the drawing-room door.

The large drawing-room, half dark, was full of heavy walnut furniture, the chair seats were all thickly embroidered, and so were the heavy curtains; the work of dead and forgotten hands. Great cabinets of china stood like sentinels against the walls, throwing into shadow the family portraits, dingy landscapes and religious pictures. On round tables stood Oriental bowls, full of potpourri. From the conservatory—almost large enough to be called a winter garden, came the chirping of the varied plumage birds that swung among the palm trees. This was the right setting for Agatha; her ancestral surroundings gave her the self-confidence she sometimes lacked.

The little girl went into the room, sure of her welcome, and stood at Agatha's side, placing a hand on her knee. No one else put a hand on Agatha's knee, she was not a caressing woman, and did not inspire demonstration. Andrew McKay thought that Eunice had taken Monica's place, keeping the boy a little out of his own, perhaps.

"Is Desmond coming?"

"He will be here in a minute. You're not going to scold him, auntie."

"No; I'm not going to scold Desmond. Has he done anything to deserve it?"

"He never means to do anything bad." She hesitated. "He does just what comes into his head."

"Not unlike his mother," interposed Andrew quizzically.

Agatha gave a quick gesture of dissent. She saw no likeness between herself and her son.

Desmond was a boy of his word. He had washed not only his hands but his face. But he was not a picture-postcard, velveteen-and-lace-collar boy. He wore a knickerbocker suit of worn tweed and a turndown collar in its second stage; his boots were irregularly laced, and his stockings not properly pulled up. His hands were rough and ill-kempt; one washing had been obviously insufficient for them. There was a watermark between his chin and a red ear that some teased beast had bitten; he had what his mother called "a game-keeper's complexion"; the crooked parting Eunice had feared showed irregularly in the crisp black of his hair, a front tooth had been chipped. Only his blue eyes were beyond criticism.

Andrew had a son of his own now, older than this boy, and being very carefully reared. He had not seen the Marley heir for nearly two years, and, after greeting, began almost immediately to question him. Andrew had but one standard of education, and Desmond fell hopelessly below it.

He had not begun Latin or French; as for his arithmetic there was not a question Andrew put to him that he answered correctly. He shuffled on his feet, resented the examination, became dogged and sullen.

"It is even worse than I anticipated," was Andrew's conclusion. "There is no doubt something must be done," he said to her. "You ought to be at school, you know," he told the boy. "You would like to have companions, be with other fellows of your own age!"

"No, I shouldn't!" Desmond said bluntly. "I don't want to go to school in England."

Agatha had invited her friends' sons to play with him, the boys from Denham and Amherst. He had nothing in

common with these English boys, dressed in black cloth and Eton collars, from high-class preparatory schools, who talked of cricket or football, who could not imitate the notes of birds, or ride bare-backed ; boys as clean as Eunice, unfriendly to him and curious.

"I am not wanting to be with English boys."

Having thus answered, and shown that her consideration in providing him with playmates had been wasted, the boy flushed and glanced at his mother. He had done every conceivable thing that had been forbidden in the last forty-eight hours, and now he showed his ignorance and ingratitude. He was ashamed that there were no consequences to be faced. Agatha never punished him ; she was always pursuing her extraordinary inoperative methods towards gaining his confidence. He guessed they had been talking about him, that it was on his account the man was here. He knew that each visit to Marley Court showed him up more unfavourably. He told himself he did not care, that his home was in Fermanagh with his father, the home that was one day to be his own, the pile of ruins called Languedoc Castle, the uncultivated acres and wild tenantry, freedom.

"I want to go home ; I don't want to go to school here !" he burst out.

"But you know this is your home," Andrew interrupted. "I think he should fully understand that," he said to Agatha.

"I'm going to live always with my father when I'm grown up," Desmond answered, flushed and dogged.

"You really want to grow up unlettered, uncultured, ignorant?" Andrew ask him satirically.

Desmond had known all this was coming, his father had prepared him. They wanted to pen him up in a boarding school, to make him learn Latin and Greek. His father had incited him to rebellion.

"They want to cheat me of my six months, my boy, that's what they mean to do ; put you in a livery with a high hat on like a groom !" For Eton had already been discussed.

The discussion was continued this afternoon. Andrew wanted to see if Desmond had imbibed anything of the Marley

Court atmosphere, if he had any appreciation of the refinement and beauty of his mother's mode of life. If it were so, he was unable to elicit it. The boy was armed on all points; he spoke in his father's words, or in Biddy's. He thought he was being loyal, yet watched his mother's face. If he were defiant there was a strange undercurrent.

All the time the lawyer spoke Desmond was sick with his own sullen and dogged replies. For somewhere in his secret heart he did want to go to school and grow up like other boys, not to be ignorant and rough, so that his mother should be ashamed of him.

They let him go presently. If they had to act for his benefit, they saw they would have to do without any help from him. Lord Grindelay had used his opportunities well, apparently better than Agatha had used hers.

"How does he impress you?" she asked, after Desmond had left the room, slamming the door behind him, with a nod for "good-bye," and as if he were glad to be off, and had settled the question of his future.

"He only wants training," Andrew answered consolingly. "You know that as well as I do."

Whatever she felt about him, Andrew could read it was not quite what she expressed. She was jealous of his father's influence upon him, although too instinctively reticent to show or even admit it. She was hurt that he would rather be at Languedoc than Marley; seeing that now Marley was all that an estate should be, and Languedoc but a ruin and a nightmare.

CHAPTER VI

ANDREW MCKAY's efforts were successful. The Court, or the Judge in Chambers, agreed that the heir to Marley and Languedoc must certainly be educated. Lord Grindelay could not seriously oppose it, and there were no Protestant schools in Ireland whose claims he could reasonably urge. Desmond was therefore sent to a private tutor, and ultimately to Eton, where in an astonishingly short period of time he became completely reconciled not only to what his father had been pleased to call "the livery," but even to the discipline and restraints. For this probably the games were responsible. From the beginning fives and football appealed to the wild little Irish boy, and the enchanting river. From fives he graduated to racquets, and from sculling to rowing. At eighteen he had established an athletic, although not a scholastic, reputation, was in "Pop," the team for Queen's, and, after having been for two terms in the boats, had a chance for *the* boat, a distinction with a difference that Eunice knew now as well as himself.

Desmond's first year at Eton had been made remarkable by the appearance of Lord Grindelay on the fourth of June in a white hat of astonishing antiquity, a loquacity that defied even Dr. Warre, and an evening mood after the procession of boats and fireworks that inclined the boy's housemaster then and always afterwards to be sympathetic, and as far as possible even compassionate, to his shortcomings. "He has had a bad example, poor fellow; we must not be hard on him," explained "me tutor's" mental attitude after seeing the effect of a long day's thirst upon the Irish peer.

Desmond had been ordered to pass half his vacation with one, and the remainder with the other, of his irreconcilable parents. He and his father remained good friends, and there was sport enough in Fermanagh with the dogs and the horses to keep him entertained, even when he grew old enough and sufficiently sophisticated to miss the physical comforts or enervating luxuries of Marley.

What he missed most at Languedoc, however, as the years went on, was the devoted service and admiring hero-worship of the little girl who, from cleaning his gun to disentangling his fishing lines, was never happier than when waiting upon him. Between his mother and himself there was the barrier of his father, although now and again it did not seem insurmountable.

Agatha watched Desmond for hereditary vices, yet always with a growing anxiety to find him a Wanstead and not a Foulds. He knew he was watched, feeling sometimes a dumb resentment. The mothers of his friends loved their sons uncritically. He felt a mother-want about the world, it brought him closer to his father, with whom at least he was sure of his footing.

At the end of his last year at Eton, however, Desmond had taken on much of the colour, and many of the characteristics, of the school, toning better, therefore, with the Marley background. This year, and of his own choice, he lingered through the Easter vacation at Marley when he should have been at Languedoc. Biddy could no longer be sent to fetch him; he was too old for force, the time had almost come when he must make a personal selection between his parents. Agatha, for ever watching him, growing more exacting as she grew more fond, vexed herself lately over his reports, and could not understand his lack of ambition, his low place in class.

"There's no good my swotting," he said easily. "It isn't as if I was clever." He was quite satisfied to be allowed to remain on, and not to be superannuated.

"What does she mean with her 'studying'?" he said to Eunice. "I'm not a tug. Isn't she pleased that I'll have a chance for the eight?" He had an almost imperceptible accent, an occasional turn of phrase or thought that seemed un-English to his mother. Everything that was Irish held pain for her; in hiding this pain she hid herself from her son's eyes, and perhaps a little from her own. But if their neutrality flashed sometimes into what looked like antagonism, many times now it had another aspect.

Now, sometimes, when Eunice kissed her, coming to her for love or mothering, she had a spasm of desire, of heart-ache that the caress or appeal had not been from him.

Nevertheless, this Easter that Desmond lingered in Marley when he should have been at Languedoc was among the happiest times she had ever spent. Unconsciously she began to build castles. They were children yet, but one day they would grow up.

But still, true to herself, she would not encourage her dreams. She reminded herself continually of her promise to Eunice's mother. This was the first time she began to realise, however dimly, that Eunice was her duty, and Desmond her son. That he had also a father she wished now to be able to forget, to put away from her whenever possible.

Lord Grindelay had grown worse as the years went on. Now he was almost a monster in Agatha's eyes; her own connection with him well-nigh unbearable. Disgusting, but never incredible, tales surmounted the difficulties of the Irish Channel, and were wafted to Marley, scandalous tales of drunken orgies, loose women, looser language, of a mode of life always more out of date.

Therefore, when the telegram came from Languedoc announcing that Lord Grindelay was dead, her first emotion was one of overwhelming relief. It seemed almost too good to be true; an end of all the scandals. She had lain awake at nights thinking how to avoid exposing the adolescent lad to his father's contaminating company; how to prevent his listening to his dreadful stories, perhaps finding pleasure in his pleasures.

She was so relieved in knowing there was now no reason why her son should not grow up into that innocent and immaculate manhood of which all mothers dream, that she never paused to think there might be another aspect to the question. She was glad, thankful. It never struck her that Desmond might think differently about his father's death.

Desmond was out when the telegram came. He and Eunice had gone together to a tennis tournament at Denham Place.

Agatha thought of sending for him, but it was a long way off, and they might have already started for home; it was only an afternoon affair. She felt extraordinarily content as she waited to tell Desmond that his father was dead, quite oblivious of any point of view but her own. She really felt that Lord Grindelay had been an encumberer of the ground. She did not know that her ever-growing abhorrence for his views had been deepened by their dual proprietorship in their son. She did not know how the slow growth of her feelings was rooting them.

Desmond had put off his visit to Languedoc, trying to explain himself in his letters to that ever-indulgent father with whom he was so much more intimate than with the mother he always, in some curious and unacknowledged way, felt himself unable to satisfy.

"Dear Dad, do you mind if I don't come for a few days yet? Marley is so wonderful just now. You may be guessing why I can't tear myself away; it's not because I don't want to be with you. . . ."

His father knew more about him and Eunice than he did himself, although they had hardly spoken of it. Desmond was only at the beginning of things, inarticulate.

"Dear laddie, the houri before the horses for sure," Pat wrote cheerfully, "and haven't I been there myself?" Larry told Desmond later on what Lord Grindelay had said when the letter came.

"He said he wasn't forcin' you to come over, although you were the light of his eyes, much more to him than you iver was to your foine English mother who had Marley and the gurl and her blarmed orchids."

"Please yourself when you come," wrote his father, when again Desmond postponed his return. "I can guess well enough what's keeping you, but don't let it be too long, don't throw me over altogether. It's longing to see you we are here, and I've a hunter ready for you that will take you all you know to get over the fences. He is too much for me altogether. . . ."

Poor Pat! he was going downhill fast, and wanted the boy

badly, but when Desmond asked permission to stay away he could not bear to say "no" to him. He, too, had his pride.

Desmond never read the note of loneliness in the letters, nor dreamt his father was missing him. Desmond's feelings were deepening, but the depths were only in one direction. Three-fourths of him were still schoolboy. Yet he knew in these holidays that Eunice was not his sister, and that when his hands touched the silk of her hair, or she put her sweet lips to his for the good-night kiss as she had done all her life, his heart shook, and he was her champion. That was all he thought, that he must defend her, not yet knowing from what, and that it was from himself.

This afternoon, as they had driven together in the old-fashioned family barouche to Denham Place, he sat by her side hardly speaking. She rallied him on his glumness, and he gave her the first reason that came into his head. How could he tell her what he hardly knew himself, that it was because she was sitting so near to him and his blood was rising?

"It's my father I was thinking of," he answered. "I ought to be in Ireland now. He wrote I was to take my own time, but he expected me by the 12th, and now it's the 20th. I can't think what's keeping me here."

And at that he looked shyly at her, and his heart pounded. She was quite unconscious of it, being in all essentials still a child. She gave his arm a little squeeze and said:

"Oh, don't go! It's so lovely to have you here. I wish you were here always."

"He looks forward to my coming; there are few friends of his own age and standing left now."

Presently he blundered out that he was sorry he was going away from her, but covered it up with more talk of his father; all to excuse that he was tongue-tied because he was sitting beside her and she looked so wonderful in her white dress and hat with the black ribbon and pink roses. Her hair was unplaited to-day, and the scent of it caught his breath.

He talked about his father to cover his silences. Although he was reluctant to leave Marley just now, it was not for lack

of affection toward him. The drunken old reprobate, so unfortunately mated, had won more love from his son than Agatha had up to the present, more conscious love, at any rate. The 'adventurousness of Lord Grindelay's spirit, and his sense of humour, the never-failing indulgence, had won him his son in babyhood. Marley had become home too, now, and about his mother was something that, up to late this very afternoon, was indefinitely, if reluctantly, calling to him. But he did not care for her as he did for the old red-faced father who had taught him to ride when he was four years old, to shoot before he could hardly carry a gun; who had always treated him like a man, neither watching nor doubting him; incapable of criticising, but not of hugging him.

Desmond loved his father with something of pity and something of understanding. He knew he drank; if there were other things he did there was an undefined suspicion in the boy's mind that the marriage of which he was the issue might have been responsible for some of them. He felt the differences between his parents; reproaching himself now and again, and calling himself a snob because he liked to bring his Eton friends to Marley, and never took one to Languedoc, although he knew their welcome would be warm. He could see, even if it were dimly, how out of place his mother must have been at Languedoc. But he, too, was sensitive of criticism about it, could realise his father's irritation with an English wife there, seeing the unfriendliness of her eyes and all their cool appraisement.

That afternoon, at Denham Place, Desmond however put all such thoughts away from him. They had helped to quiet his heart and to keep him from telling the girl anything at all of the sudden wish he had had to put his arm about her waist, and explain to her what had come over him.

He and Eunice carried off all the honours of the tournament that afternoon. Afterwards they had a gorgeous tea, all the boy and girl competitors together, chattering like magpies, with their young dignity gone down before the wholesome excitement of the exercise. When he and Eunice drove home they were no longer alone; they had Jack Reid and the

Amhurst boys with them, and Desmond's mood was altogether different. Jack was the son of the Great Marley doctor, already at Cambridge. He talked animatedly of rowing, and what he meant to do later; of Blues and bumps. One Campden boy was still at Eton, the other was at Sandhurst and urging Desmond to follow in his footsteps. They were all full of the afternoon match, and what a "fluke" the Marley Court victory had been. Challenges were laughingly exchanged, and it was agreed that Jack Reid and the younger Campden should take on Eunice and Desmond the next day or the day after. They were very gay and happy. There was nothing to prepare him for what was immediately in front.

They dropped the three boys at Great Marley. At the lodge gates of the Court they heard that Lady Grindelay had sent out a message that they were not to loiter, but to come straight to the house. They had a habit of avoiding the long straight drive, and strolling home through the woods. They wondered perfunctorily what was up, and were disappointed at the tame end to their afternoon. Of course, they had meant to walk. Desmond, when they drove up to the door, got out quickly.

"Tell her I'll be with her in ten minutes. I must change. I never can make out how you manage to keep tidy, whatever happens."

"I don't *feel* tidy."

Desmond, once difficult to persuade to common cleanliness, was now very particular about his clothes, and had a deep interest in his tailor and hosier and the colour of his ties.

Eunice did not wait to change, but went straight to her aunt.

"But it was not you I wanted, it was Desmond," Lady Grindelay exclaimed.

"You often want Desmond instead of me now, don't you?" Eunice pouted. She needed affection as flowers need water, and bloomed in it.

"Do I? But Desmond is my son." There was a new thrill in the word as she said it.

"Well, I am your daughter, aren't I?" She threw herself

on the stool beside her, fondling her. "Desmond will be here in a minute. We've had a perfectly lovely afternoon. We won the tournament, and we've each got a new racquet."

She poured out all her news. Lady Grindelay listened, keeping back her own. She liked the young confidence, was fond of the child, very fond, and meant to do well by her. It had been gradually and imperceptibly that the two had changed places. Nobody but herself knew, and she only half-consciously, that Desmond was now in the foreground.

"Oh, auntie, how I wish Desmond need never go away! It's so different when he is here, going about with him instead of Miss Stacey." Miss Stacey was Eunice's governess; Eunice was a better pupil than her mother had been, but little fonder of her lessons. "We do have such lovely times. He was talking this afternoon of going to Ireland again. Do stop him—*do!*"

Lady Grindelay answered quickly:

"Many more impossible things have happened than that Desmond should remain here altogether."

"Not go to Languedoc at all! But how ripping!"

"I would like you to avoid the habit of talking slang."

"But it would be ripping, wouldn't it? I can't think of another word. Is it true, is it really true? Needn't he go at all?"

Desmond's entrance interrupted her questions, but she conveyed the news to him instantly.

"You are to stay here."

"What's up?"

Desmond had grown more in height than in muscle, in grace rather than strength. He was a handsome boy now, with his blue eyes alive and alert under his dark lashes, and any mother might have been proud of him. Agatha felt a thrill of satisfaction in knowing that he had become wholly hers.

"What is it? What's this about not going to Languedoc?" He looked from one to another. "Of course I'm going, I wrote to father yesterday. I only put it off for a week." Now he forgot what had detained him, and thought of nothing but Pat waiting for him. "Is he angry?"

"No," she answered shortly, with a swift pang of jealousy, seeing the change in his face, his anxiety.

The boy was quickly apprehensive of disaster, fearing he knew not what. Behind that low forehead where the dark hair curled crisply, at the back of the rebellious turmoil of his childhood and the athletic prowess of his youth, lay an ever-acute, if hidden, sensitiveness. Instinctively he braced himself. If there was a blow coming he must not show he felt it, not to his mother, anyway.

"Father isn't ill?" he managed to ask.

"He is dead."

Agatha held out the telegram. In justice to her it must be said she never believed anybody could really care for Pat Grindelay. She could not keep the note of satisfaction from her voice; she said it as one who said, "Now you are free." But Desmond heard the words as a wash of water in his ears, felt a pain as of drowning, a rush of feeling so strong that it nearly swept him from his feet. He was conscious of hating her for telling him, of an overwhelming resentment towards her. He could not trust himself to speak. The words rushed about his ears like dead wreckage; he felt utterly forlorn, drowning. His father was dead, his dear father, who loved him.

Eunice saw the dreadful change in his face. She was by his side in an instant, her soft hand slid into his, he felt the softness of the hand through his stunned consciousness, and kept his grip upon it. Agatha knew that she had given her news too abruptly.

"The telegram says very little. Perhaps you would like to see it."

She held it out to him, but he made no movement toward her. He was thinking that he hated her for not caring, and that he would never forgive her. His father! He was swimming alone, with the waters rising, dead wreckage beating about him, an unbearable pain in his heart. Eunice kept tight hold of his hand; she understood.

"Poor Desmond, poor, *darling* Desmond!" Although she had never seen his father, and knew nothing of him but vaguely

that he had made auntie unhappy, her sympathetic tears began to fall. "Don't look like that; we'll comfort you—auntie and I." Her tears fell. "Won't we, auntie?"

"You had better sit down." Agatha paled at the sight of his pale face. "I am sorry you are so distressed," she went on compassionately. "We shall have to think what is to be done. It may be advisable we should go over."

She did not know what to say. It seemed to her such a good thing that Lord Grindelay was dead, the unhappiness of her son's face hurt her.

Desmond did not sit down; he stood still and fought for his self-command.

"I can catch the night mail," he got out presently.

"To-morrow, or even next day, will be time enough. I have already telegraphed to Andrew McKay. He will see that proper arrangements are made."

Desmond felt very cold, and physically a little sick as he disengaged his hand from Eunice's. The sickness was of longing for his father, for the red face and Irish accent, for the warmth of his greeting and the hearty hand upon his shoulder. Was it true that he would never see him again? "*Father!*" And she was glad, *glad*—he saw it in her eyes. Resentment swelled in his swelling heart, and pain stifled the sob in his throat. "*Father!*" He could have cried the word, and for all the remembered kindness! He went from the room quickly, for neither of them must see his eyes. He must see his father once again, must get to him, and to the warmth of those Irish servants; to the "Is it yersilf thin, Mr. Desmond?" of Larry and the rest; to Biddy's arms and sympathy, since his mother could only look wonderingly at him.

He was upstairs in his room, flinging his possessions together, opening disordered drawers, cramming underclothes and overclothes into one distended trunk, seeing nothing for the tears that were falling, before Agatha fully realised that he was suffering.

"Go after him!" she said to Eunice. "I did not think he would be so distressed."

Eunice was quick to obey her, quick to understand. After

all, Lord Grindelay *was* Desmond's father, although he wore a white hat and sometimes drank more than was good for him, and kept Desmond from them.

"He was dreadfully upset."

"I am afraid I broke it to him too abruptly. It never struck me that he could care."

The mistress of Marley so seldom saw there were two sides to any question, her own and the other person's. Of course, she had not wanted to wound the boy, but it had seemed so wonderful that just at the most important moment of his career he should be without that which might impede it.

"Go after him; tell him I am sorry I broke it so abruptly. Let him know he is to do just as he likes about going over." Eunice had already gone.

But Desmond would have done just as he liked without his mother's message. And that was to get to Ireland as quickly as train and steamer would carry him, with or without her permission. He did not want Eunice to comfort him, nor that she should see he had been crying. He locked his door against her, commanded his voice enough to call out to her that she was not to bother him, that he was packing.

"Get the dog-cart round! Look up the trains!"

"Can't I help you pack?" she asked through the door.

"Let me in, Desmond. I want to be with you. I'm so sorry."

"I've no time for talking."

And no inclination. He wanted to be alone. When she came back to tell him about the trains he still did not unlock the door. She had to call out to him through it that he would be able to catch a train for London in time for the Irish mail if he could be ready in fifteen minutes.

"All right!" was all the answer. He did not want to see anyone with this desolation upon him, and the tears he could not keep from falling. Why had he lingered on here? What he wanted to do now was to get out of the house, to be on his way to Ireland, that no one should speak to him.

And he accomplished it, or very nearly. Eunice, lying in wait, gave him a hurried kiss, and whispered:

"I'm sorry if you're sorry, Desmond. I wish I were coming with you to help and comfort you."

His mother was in the hall when he went through. She knew now the less she said to him the better. The dog-cart was at the door.

"Put my bag in front."

He was hurrying through; he did not want to speak.

"You will need money."

He had not given it a thought. It flashed through her mind then that in some ways he was like his father, and the knowledge was like a flame in the love that was beginning to burn her. But for her forethought he would have gone to Euston without the means to go farther.

"It is all I have in the house, but I think there is enough."

He was not grateful; he only wanted to get away from her and that she should not see his red eyes. He said hastily:

"Thanks. I shall have to drive him all I know."

He did not stay to say good-bye to her or Eunice, but was out of the door and in the dog-cart, had gathered up the reins and was off, before it seemed possible.

CHAPTER VII

IT was Andrew McKay's opinion, expressed in a carefully worded letter arriving in Marley the next day by the hand of a special messenger, that Lady Grindelay should go over to Ireland for her husband's funeral and be present at the reading of the will, if there were a will—in any case, be on hand to assert her rights to the guardianship, not only of whatever property may have been left to her son, but of that young man himself. Andrew McKay offered to accompany her. She could take twenty-four hours to make up her mind, he wrote, or even more. The funeral would not in any case be before Friday.

The messenger who brought the letter was his own son, young Michael McKay, just graduated in Edinburgh, and already in his father's office.

Lady Grindelay made the young man welcome, but took time to consider the unpalatable advice he brought. Meanwhile Eunice did the honours of the house, and so well that young Michael thought then, and never ceased to think in the years that followed, that a sweeter chatelaine, or one more fitted for the post she occupied, had never been. She took him into the rose garden, and where the cultivated violets lay at the foot of the sundial among the old lead figures; to see the new puppies and Desmond's black mare. Michael had been here as a boy with his father, but a series of accidental circumstances had kept him away during the last three or four years. Eunice and he renewed their acquaintance almost as strangers.

Eunice understood her aunt wanted solitude and was to be relieved of the young man. At lunch she heard he was to stay the night, and that her aunt would go to London with him in the morning. A telegram had already been dispatched to his father.

After lunch she took him on the river.

It was so early in the spring that they had the river to themselves. In many places it had overflowed its banks; here at Marley it was wide and full. They stood and watched it together a little while when they came back from their row, and Eunice thought of Desmond, and what a dull companion Michael was in comparison. Then she was suddenly filled with compunction lest she should fail in kindness towards her guest. There was a climb before them, and a long walk to the house. This part of Marley Wood sloping to the river was far-lying.

"If you think you will be tired we can telephone from the boat-house to the stables. Perhaps we had better; it is getting late."

Michael was in the mood to accede to anything she proposed. They waited on the banks for the carriage, and she tried to make conversation for him.

"There is a notice up about picnic parties and boats not trespassing, but they come all the same in the summer and tie up under the trees. I think it is nice to feel we are giving people shade or shelter. I want auntie to take down the notices, to let them land, and spread their teas, and walk in the woods."

"But you would not know what sort of people might come," he objected; "people from the East End of London, trippers. You would find soiled paper lying about, and empty bottles."

"I don't think that would matter at all. They could be cleared away. And the poorer the people were, or the smaller the homes they came from, the better it would seem to them to be here."

"But you would not be able to come out alone."

"I never do come here alone as it is. When Desmond isn't here, my governess comes with me, or auntie."

It seemed to him very fitting she should be so well chaperoned and guarded. At six and twenty, Michael was something of a prig, thinking all his prejudices were principles. A tall and well set-up young man, nevertheless, whose gravity became him. He wore an eyeglass, but only because the sight

of one eye was really defective. It represented, nevertheless, his outlook on life. It was all in tin boxes and iron safes, docketed and labelled.

At dinner-time, however, he noticed that the girl's complexion looked even fairer in the evening than by daylight. He saw her small and slender hands, her instinctive grace, the sympathetic way she looked at Lady Grindelay. The occasion was a solemn one, or at least serious; the note of the dinner-table fitted it, being subdued and quiet. So was all the service, suiting his taste. He tried to remember her age. She wore her hair down, but surely she must be seventeen. He began to think of his own age, and of all the examinations he had passed so brilliantly, and to plume himself on his LL.B. and gold medal.

He had not intended to marry until he was at least thirty and a partner in the firm. But when he went to bed that night he reconsidered the question. Twenty-seven was surely a good age for matrimony. He would be out of his articles next year; and there was his mother's money waiting for him. So thinking, he fell asleep to dream of Eunice; the first of many such nights.

He escorted Lady Grindelay to London next morning. She had to get mourning, prepare for the ordeal in front of her, although she did not guess what an ordeal it was to prove.

"Tell your father I will meet him at Euston. He is not to bother about me until then. I have plenty to do."

"He told me to ask you if you would lunch with him in the City or at home—I've only to let him know. Perhaps you would allow me to give you lunch at my club?"

"I should prefer not to make any appointments. It is very kind of your father, and of you. I am quite all right alone."

"And for lunch?"

"I shall get something to eat when I have finished my shopping. There are plenty of places."

"Until to-night, then."

"Yes, if you are seeing us off."

Lady Grindelay bought mourning; she knew what was

the right thing to do. She might feel glad, inexpressibly relieved, but she must not show it. She bought a widow's bonnet with long streamers, white lawn collars, cuffs and caps. Now it was comparatively easy for her to pay respect to her husband's memory. Whilst he was alive respect was impossible. It was Andrew McKay's advice that she should go to Ireland for the funeral, but it accorded with her own sense of the fitness of things.

It was perhaps unfortunate that his advice and her views were the same. It would have been so much better had she stayed at Marley, better for herself as well as for Desmond if she had never attended the obsequies of that deceased, somewhat beloved, but never respected nobleman, Patrick Canning Warner Foulds, late Lord Grindelay.

What she found at Languedoc Castle, besides the corpse—which to the great scandal of the household and outdoor servants, and the tenantry who got to know of it, she never visited at all—was very much what she had left in high disgust some twenty years before. Dirt, disorder and discomfort beyond the telling. Wild trees unpruned, great hedges unclipped, cattle straying up to the very door where the dilapidated coach and odd horses drew her and Andrew; fallen masonry outside, and inside, bare walls and oddly carpeted floors, upholstered furniture in the first stage of decay and carved furniture in the last stage of ill-treatment, and absence of baths or even hot water, of light other than guttering candles, of servants other than garrulous or sullen, of service, in the way she understood the word, trained and competent; of even decency in a house of mourning, as decency is understood on the other side of the Channel.

But there was worse than that, infinitely worse, that neither she nor Andrew had anticipated.

They had thought to be met by the new Lord Grindelay, by Desmond. Eton and Marley must have acquainted him with the proprieties. She anticipated, and Andrew also, that the boy would stand between her and the humours or amenities of this out of date Irish household.

But neither on the night she arrived nor the next morning

was anything to be seen of Desmond. "Mr. Desmond, God bless him," was there, so she was told, but no one "would be for fetchin' him from his father's room." "It's not himself he is entoirely," was a euphemism she did not understand. She was outside her son's mind, knowing nothing of the agony of self-reproach that had accompanied him here, nothing of the thirty-six hours he had spent in the chamber of Death, almost without sleep, listening to the story of how his father's end had come about. He was young and impressionable, remorseful, miserable. She thought him wanting in respect, affection, because he neither met her at the station nor came to her when she arrived. She was hurt, and thought she was angry, speaking bitterly of him to Andrew and of his father's influence. But it was not that he lacked respect or affection, only that she was not in his mind at all.

His father had asked for him all those three days of his illness; he could have been there, seen him once more, heard his last words. But he had stayed away. He even forgot what had detained him, and could remember nothing but that he had been thoughtless and selfish. Biddy, who had been his own nurse, and Larry, who was Lord Grindelay's body-servant, tried to console him.

"An' didn't we kape tellin' him if ye'd only known, ye'd have bin over an' minit, an' that it wasn't you didn't care for him nor the want of the warm heart. But nothin' served. I saw the tears rowl down his cheeks. 'I shan't see him agin,' he sed. 'She's got him, the ——, an' she'll kape him, bad cess to her.' But I mustn't tell ye the words he put to yer lady mother. It wasn't him that was mealy-mouthed, as you'll remimber. 'She's got him an' she'll kape him,' he sed; 'there's no use telegraphin'. Though me eyes are achin' for a soight of his face, she'll not let him come.' He was beginnin' his dyin', thin, but as clear in his mind as you or me. 'She'll sind it up to the lawyer's office, an' all I'll get 'll be printin' from Andrew McKay, God curse him,' he said."

"You might have wired."

"An' so I might; ye're right there. But it all came about so quick, an' me fingers had got soddened with the powltrices.

The bit of a girl at the post office would maybe have written for me, but I was hearin' she wasn't there any more by rayson of them havin' got a bhoy instid, an impident bit of a clerk. We were cheerin' him an' tellin' him to give over talkin' and coughin', an' we'd pull him through, an' there'd be the foine toimes you an' he'd be afther havin' together whin ye did come. An' whiniver the docthor wint away we jist give him the whisky, an' hoped for the best."

And then Biddy would start wailing, and Larry would join in, so that Mr. Desmond would not know what a sad best it was, this death the whisky could no longer keep away.

"Shure he jist hiccoughed himsilf into hell—as Father Malone would have it," Larry sobbed at the end of the telling; "cursin' your mother, an' himsilf because he was gettin' out of the way, an' she'd have ye to hersilf whin he was gone. He knew the hatred she had against him, the foine, liberal, noble gentleman that he was."

The boy was red-eyed from want of sleep, from crying, and because of his remorse.

"It wasn't she that kept me; it was for my own pleasure I stayed away." But they did not believe him.

"What are ye afther tellin' us? Don't we know it's here ye had the foine times? At the very last his moind was wanderin'. He kep' sayin' she'd turned you aginst him, an' that you'd grow up a wather dhrinker, an' not be able to hould yer glass, nor tell a story, nor sing a song, an' that it was not an Irishman ye'd come back at all, at all, wid no love in yer heart for the ould place nor the ould ways. But we didn't belave him, did we, Biddy? We kep' tellin' him to have done, an' givin' him the whisky."

But Biddy and Larry were not only repeating their late master's words. With national craft and an eye to the future, they poured out their voluble patriotism. What was to become of them all if it were true that the new Lord Grindelay was taken up with English ways?

Larry and Biddy touched all the chords in Desmond's sensitive and ravaged heart, found where he was tender, and struck the tenderness to sound as if it had been a harp and

theirs the fingers that could play upon it. Desmond spent the first night here on his knees by poor Pat's coffin; he hadn't to hide his eyes from these old servants nor show any self-restraint. Travel-stained, exhausted with tears and remorse, truly he was not himself. He sobbed that he was an Irishman, and that everything for which his father cared he would care for too and preserve.

"An' God bless ye, Mr. Desmond—milord, for it's a thrue Foulds ye are an' yer father's son, for all yer foreign trainin'."

Biddy brought him the food that choked him to eat, and, when he put it on one side, coaxed him to his milk and potheen that went down so much easier.

* * * * *

There was a constant coming and going in that great room where the coffin stood on its high trestles, the old servants keening and crying, and the black bottle going round. A disgraceful scene, some would have called it; but the note of grief was genuine, and the boy found comfort in it. His brain grew confused, but his trouble was solaced. Everybody here loved his father. He could not face his mother's indifference or coldness. Not just yet. He had not been with his father when he called for him, but he would stay with him to the end, and among these dear familiar people who were keening for him.

It was true that he was not himself on the day of the funeral. Women with streaming eyes and aprons thrown over their heads, men in scarecrow clothes, ragged girls and boys, murmured their sympathy. The house was full on the morning of the funeral, when his mother saw him for the first time. He had been beside the coffin until then, in the darkened room.

Lord Grindelay was to be borne to his last resting place by none but those who loved him. There were more than enough to be found in Languedoc, friends and neighbours. Desmond was to walk at the head of the procession. Lady Grindelay, who had been informed but not consulted as to the

arrangements, was impatient of it all, of the dreadful memories that came to her. Time had obscured them, but now they thronged about her again. Every day of her married life here her sensitiveness had been shocked, her taste violated, her traditions outraged. She wanted the funeral to be over, to get away, to take Desmond with her, and forget he had ever had another parent than herself. In the future there would be no one between them.

Desmond was not in the great hall when, in her conventional widow's weeds, she came down from her bed-room. Andrew, from an indistinguishable crowd of people, curious or resentful, came forward to meet her; but Desmond was not there. The hall door stood open, and beyond it, in the drizzling rain, were people and yet more people, a black and moving crowd. She could see the coffin and clergy; men in high hats, women with aprons over their heads, everyone but her son.

Andrew offered her his arm.

"They are going to start."

"And Desmond?"

"Desmond is one of the bearers. I haven't been able to speak to him; he is out there with the others."

She went on Andrew's arm to follow the procession that had already been formed. But it was not until they were half-way to the mausoleum that she saw Desmond.

Could that be Desmond? Her Desmond? The young Etonian who had left Marley in his clothes made by Brown, and his straw hat with the blue and black ribbon? He was dressed in mourning, shiny and ridiculous, hastily made by the village tailor. His shoulder supported the corner of the coffin; he looked neither to left nor right, plodding on with the others.

The whole scene was strange, the slow-moving procession, the shiny black hats in the rain, the tramp of many feet, and the voices of the wailing women. It seemed endless hours that she walked, too, her hand on Andrew McKay's arm, but never speaking to him. Alien to them both was the scene, the prayers and the wild cries when the coffin was placed in

the mausoleum, the funeral service sounding strange in the brogue, the immediate change of mood when it was all over; the almost festive air of the now straggling multitude.

"Are they all coming back with us?" she asked Andrew in dismay.

"There is a big feast spread in the dining-room; they seem to have been busy at it for days. Many of the neighbours come from a long distance," he added apologetically.

"You know I have not seen Desmond since I have been here. He has never been near me."

"He is surrounded now by his father's friends and retainers."

He wanted to prepare her. But no preparation could disguise the truth. Andrew had seen that Desmond stumbled as he walked, the coffin resting on his shoulder. But there were nine others to support it, and Larry was by the side of his dead master's son. Andrew still hoped Agatha had seen nothing.

Lady Grindelay, apart from the mourners, in her well-cut black, veil down, a black-edged handkerchief in her hand, was dry-eyed, as everyone could see. There was a feeling against her in the crowd that overflowed the grounds, although it was kept from breaking into demonstration by the occasion. But here a word and there a word escaped, and they were loud in Desmond's ears.

"An' he might have bin alive if she'd had the warmth in her heart to warm him."

"He was a fine jintleman, an' not a tear in her eye for him."

Desmond felt that which kept him from going to his mother, although he was in no condition for thinking. Andrew went to him when they got back to the house, and tried to draw him apart.

"Will you come with me now to your mother? She has gone to her room."

Larry whispered, "She's goin' to tell ye not to fret for him."

"Perhaps it would be better if you sat quietly with her

for a little, if you did not appear in the dining-room." Andrew had not guessed Desmond to be so far gone as now he saw him. "Will you come with me?"

"I suppose you think I'm drunk?" said Desmond suddenly and unexpectedly. "There is nothing at all the matter with me." He pushed away Larry, who was standing close beside him.

"Be aisy, thin."

Desmond stood upright, but lurched and laid hold of him again. "I'm not drunk. I've had no breakfast this morning." He was defending himself stupidly.

"I am sure you are not drunk."

"Of course I shall go into the dining-room."

"It's not in respect for his mimry ye'll be wantin'," Larry interrupted admiringly.

"I'll speak to my mother now." His condition gave him courage. "Where is she? You come too, Larry. Of course I'm going into the dining-room."

Andrew could not control, he could only follow, him, hoping to soften or shorten the impending scene.

Lady Grindelay was in her own room, and now he was here at her door. She saw him, where so often his father had stood to laugh at or insult her. Desmond was red-eyed, dressed in those horrible village-made clothes, his hat had streamers. But it was not the village-made clothes nor the streamers that sent that hot and surging anguish through her, that shock of remembrance.

"Mother!"

His voice was thick, his feet unsteady as he lurched forward towards her. "McKay says you don't want me to dine with my father's friends——"

"I never said so."

"You need not put out your hands to keep me off." She had not done so, but he read in her face, for all he saw so unsteadily, that it was revulsion he roused in her. He was not of an age, nor in a condition, to know that the root of the revulsion was love—love, sick and shaken with shame. Agatha wanted to put her arms about him and hold him,

hiding him from all the world. But instead of him it was herself she hid.

"I'm not coming near you. I shall pay him the last respect."

"Of imitation?" she said, unhappily. He was not too far gone to understand her meaning.

"You think I'm drunk," he answered unsteadily.

"To be shure an' you're not," said Larry, supporting him. "It's the throuble he's in," he said to Agatha. She put her hands before her face. No one could guess what the shock was to her, seeing him like this, and what dreadful memories were evoked.

But the difference was that she loved this slender, swaying figure and the thick voice. Her conscience seared her and told her all the fault was hers. He was the fruits of her incredible marriage—like this from no fault of his own. Love, pity and remorse overwhelmed her, she covered her face with her hands.

Then everything he had heard about her came into Desmond's fuddled mind, and he forgot how differently he knew her. There came upon him the garrulity and loose speech of the half-intoxicated, denials, excuses, explanations, and even reproaches.

"You never understood him. There's a gulf between the English and the Irish. If he drank it was out of the light heart. I know what I'm talking about. I'm not drunk, whatever you may think. You never cared for him; he often told me you'd set yourself against him." In the loosened speech were tears. "I'll be lonely in the world without him. Didn't he love me with the great warm heart of him, and never a word of criticism? I'm not clever enough for you, but he didn't care what I did. . . ."

If there was arraignment there was also appeal. He was lonely, death had shaken him. The mist between them, through which they could not see each other's face or heart, was the mist of tears. Her heart was crying for this poor son, and yet she could not answer him. So he went on, misjudging her.

"You are as cold as ice to me," he cried. "I'm not as bad as you think; it's only because I've had no food. If you looked at him like you're looking at me now, is it a wonder he was unhappy, and—and bitter? I've had no sleep since I've been here for hearing him calling for me, while only the servants were with him when he died. What are you looking at me for? I've seen people drunk, so you needn't think I don't know. There's nothing the matter with me."

"I have not said you are drunk," she faltered. And then, because the very word sickened her she caught at her mantle of reserve and wrapped herself in it. "Will you go now? You would be better alone, perhaps. . . ."

He resented that, and poured out more fiery incoherent words, under which she grew whiter, but less able to reply. Larry had the sense to see the scene must end, and led or coaxed him away. She heard him talking to himself as he went downstairs, holding to the stairs and saying he was "as right as rain—quite all right—but the stairs were so uneven." She would have held him in her arms and hidden him, but her lack of love-words came between. She heard afterwards of his condition at the funeral feast, and that eventually he was helped from the dining-room, as his father had been so many times.

In the morning, recovered and miserably conscious of offence, without quite remembering its heinousness, Desmond sought out Andrew, and begged him to tell his mother how it had come about, to plead for forgiveness for him. That was a mistake. He ought not to have called upon anyone for help, but have thrown himself on his knees before her. She would have lifted him up. She had come slowly to her motherhood, into her woman's kingdom of pride and pain. He did not know she was there, nor what her reign might mean. He was half afraid of her, thinking her austere and rigid. And so he made his submission through Andrew, denying her rights.

She answered Andrew coldly, covering up her heart. And Andrew urged her, knowing no better.

"Have a little tolerance, hear at least what he has to say

in excuse. These young things, they bear pain so badly! He is only a boy; not the first boy who has taken more than is good for him. Don't set up an impossible standard and expect him to conform to it. These Irish servants of his have been plying him with whisky and milk and tales. He should have been here on the 12th. He is unhappy at having lingered at Marley."

So Andrew pleaded, and tactlessly added: "And in his case, of course, there is hereditary disposition to overcome. You ought to make allowance for him, Agatha. You make mistakes yourself."

"At least I never get drunk!" she was goaded into retorting. And because he was pleading for her son, for whom no plea was needed, she put up her shield so that neither Desmond nor Andrew could see what lay behind it.

CHAPTER VIII

WHEN Lady Grindelay went back to Marley, Desmond remained at Languedoc. Andrew thought it was better so under the circumstances. He misread Agatha's silence, and thought she would be more likely to forgive the boy if there was a temporary separation between them. He came late to a real understanding of her feeling for Desmond, which is perhaps not surprising.

At Languedoc, his father's friends attentive, and the old servants solicitous, Desmond's thoughts followed his mother to Marley, and he wondered miserably what she would tell Eunice. He had said unforgivable and unforgettable things to her; he had been drunk at his father's funeral. He dwelt upon the condition of affairs between her and his father, and told himself wretchedly that because of it she had never cared for him. In a way his feeling for her had been growing with his years no less than hers for him. But he had never known it until now. He did not want forgiveness from her; he wanted love, comprehension; he felt very lonely and abandoned, and cried often for poor Pat. He could not take consolation from the attentions and solicitousness that were shown by those around him, because he was conscious of disloyalty to them, and to Languedoc.

In sight of the mountains and sea, the coastline, jutting headland and weathered rocks, the great sweeps of dark moorland, he had an unspeakable longing for the green woods of Marley and the grey house upon the hill, for the murmuring sedges where the river washed the banks, the velvet lawns and cut yew trees.

Eunice could not guess why Desmond lingered in Ireland. She wrote:

"Why are you staying away? Marley isn't Marley without you. I'm sure auntie wants you back as much as I do, although she hasn't said anything. She isn't as in-

terested in me or my lessons as usual; whenever I speak to her she seems to be thinking of something else, but not something nice. I believe she is unhappy. If you have quarrelled with her, do come home and make it up, or write her a loving letter. Whatever it is, if you say you are sorry she won't think anything more about it. She is always like that, you know; she never holds things over us."

There followed a page about matters that were full of interest to them both, of the dell with a trickle of water in it that tasted as if it came from the sea, of a fox's lair that was a secret from all the world.

"I went on the river with Michael McKay yesterday, Uncle Andrew's son. He's got a glass in his eye that he used not to have when he was here before. But I like him all the same. You haven't quarrelled with me, so mind you answer my letter. I'm longing to hear from you. Never mind about the spelling"—(for it was one of the jokes between them that Desmond was ever a bad correspondent because of this). "I promise you not to notice if you put 'beleive' instead of 'believe.' Dear Desmond, I do long for you so."

"And he? Was he not longing for her?"

"My mother doesn't want me at Marley, or I'd come like a shot," he replied, when he could bring himself to reply at all.

Eunice showed the letter to Lady Grindelay. Agatha said at first that she did not want to read it; that to show another person's letter was a breach of confidence.

"At least his spelling has improved," she said nonchalantly, when she handed it back. But Eunice noted her expression, and went on:

"You haven't forgotten it's my birthday next week?"

"No; I have not forgotten," Lady Grindelay answered. But she had. The girl's place with her had altered since her return from Ireland. She had to consider her, to consider

her above all things, because she was a sacred and precious trust. But now she resented it, she could no longer think of Eunice and Desmond together, her scheme must be abandoned. She had to guard the girl, protect her, give her to no young drunkard, however dear.

"Auntie!" The ready arms were about her, the coaxing voice in her ear. "May Desmond come for my birthday? Desmond has been here so many of my birthdays."

"I have not told him to stay away."

"He says he'll come like a shot if you want him. He thinks you don't want him. He always thinks you don't care about him like you do about me. Desmond is so sensitive."

"He might have written to me himself."

"He's so afraid of his spelling. And it's just the same if he writes to me; he knew I should show you his letter."

"I will think it over."

But she had thought of little else since she had left Ireland, and how to save him. Her conscience was as troublesome at sixty as it had been at sixteen. Why had she not warned him, spoken openly to him, and thought not of her own humiliation, but only of his good.

"Write to him, then," she said suddenly. "Tell him about your birthday, and that—that I shall be glad to see him."

Eunice hugged her and ran off to do it, lest her aunt should change her mind.

He must come back; some occupation must be found for him, some way of strengthening him. It had been planned that he was to go to Oxford when he left Eton, but now Agatha was doubtful if the Oxford atmosphere would not prove too enervating. Perhaps she should keep him under her own eye. But when she thought of that, she rejected it at once, because that was what she would have liked best.

Of one thing, however, she was quite certain. The very pain the certainty gave her, proved the necessity. Any talk or thought of love-making between the two of them, between Eunice and her poor boy must be abandoned. Monica's child must not suffer as she had done—must not be sacrificed.

In order that she should not weaken about this, for she

had it in her mind that she could refuse him nothing for which he might plead, she spoke to Andrew. Eunice was on the river with Michael; yesterday, too, had been spent in the same way.

What she said to Andrew made his response easy.

"She is too young to be talking or thinking of marriage."

"I don't think so. I should like to feel that her future is secure."

"There is no hurry, surely. She is barely seventeen."

They were in the library as they had been nearly thirty years ago, and again fourteen years later. The lawyer could forget neither occasion. He walked towards the window, looked out on the fair and lovely prospect, the rolling lawns and the great woods that stretched to the river. He could not command himself to forget.

"He said half a word to me. It had better stop now if it has to stop. I thought you had other views for her."

"If I had, I have them no longer."

He wheeled round swiftly.

"Why? You don't mean because of what happened in Languedoc you would not give her to him?"

"I hold her in trust."

"You never change from these quick decisions, from being impulsive. There is nothing the matter with the boy."

"Eunice must take no risks," she said dully. He could see she had been suffering, and forbore to argue with her. He had accepted her view of the late Irish peer, and perhaps not unnaturally agreed with her as the possibility of Desmond inheriting his proclivities.

And, then, there was nothing he wished more than that Michael should woo and wed Agatha's niece. Having missed his own happiness in life, he was anxious Michael should not do the same. He knew already how it was with Michael.

"You won't change your mind again?" he asked Agatha.

"No."

"Michael is reliable, steady, straightforward."

There was more said between them, a great deal more, but on the same lines. Such a marriage would heal any old

soreness between her and Andrew; there should never have been any between them. She knew her folly by now, and that if she had to marry any one, he should have been the man.

"I believe in young marriages," said Andrew, when the preliminaries had been arranged.

"I do not see anything for which they need wait," answered Agatha, thinking only of Desmond, and that she could devote herself entirely to him when she had no one else.

Andrew sounded a note of warning, but when had she listened to Andrew? If she gave up her dream, and suffered in its relinquishment, did not that prove she was right? And Andrew sounded his warning note but softly. He, too, thought it would be for the girl's happiness. Michael was such a good fellow, so steady.

No grass was allowed to grow under their feet. Before Desmond came back—tacitly between Andrew and Agatha, openly between Michael and his father, but with few words as became them both—it was understood that Michael had the freedom to woo, that his suit met with the approval of the elders. He knew nothing about the plan that had been before; nothing about what had been destined for Desmond.

Poor Michael! He conducted his wooing with such circumspection, was so considerate of her tender years that Eunice never even guessed the meaning of his tortuous speeches, never looked upon him as anything but a young man with dull, admiring sisters who bored her by singing his praises whenever they came to Marley or she went to Campden Hill.

Her heart was full of Desmond's coming, humming within her like a bee honey-laden. There was a little awkwardness the first evening of his arrival.

Eunice heard the wheels of the carriage coming back from the station, and rushed out impetuously into the hall. She flung herself into his arms, kissing him, exclaiming:

"Oh, Desmond! I'm so glad you've come. Oh, Desmond, you've grown, and I think you're more handsome than ever."

Desmond returned her kiss warmly, and then was startled at what came over him, and had not recovered when she led

him into the dining-room. He was travel-stained, and felt himself at a disadvantage. The table was spread with flowers and silver and glass; Michael's sisters were in white shimmering evening dresses; Michael, tall and correct, with stiff white shirt and eyeglass. His mother would think him half a savage to be coming among them like this; he could not meet her eye—stammering out his excuses.

"I don't want anything to eat."

For they would have made way for him. He did not know whether to kiss his mother or not. She was at the end of the table. She had risen agitatedly when she heard him in the hall, but had resumed her seat before he came in.

"Here he is, auntie. Hasn't he grown? I do believe he's got a moustache coming!"

Agatha was not thinking of the things her son suspected, only of the emotion his coming gave her, and that she must not betray it.

"John will bring back the soup. We have only just begun." She gave him no formal greeting, and spoke as if nothing had been between them.

"I can't sit down like this."

"Oh, yes, you can," Eunice interposed quickly. "You look as well as anything. None of us mind. Auntie ordered whitebait because she knew you liked it. We talked over the menu ever so long this morning. Don't let everything get spoilt."

"I hope you still like whitebait?" Lady Grindelay said.

He saw she meant kindness, and took the indicated place, ate with them, talked of the journey. The sense of home-coming was strong upon him as the evening wore on, and an intimate pleasure in it swelled in his voice as he talked.

He had not kissed his mother before the McKays, and the servants in the dining-room, in front of everybody. But he lingered in the drawing-room until all had gone to bed but the two of them. When Lady Grindelay got up and said:

"I think we ought to be following our guests," he seized the opportunity—shame-faced, nervous.

"I want to thank you for letting me come back," he began.

She was ever inarticulate in emotion, and hurried her answer.

"It is Eunice's birthday to-morrow. You have been here for nearly all her birthdays. You will have to go up for your examination next week. You had no books with you."

No maid with her lover could have been more shy than Agatha with her son. She wished that he would kiss her, but gave him no opportunity.

Desmond felt a little hurt, thrown back upon himself.

"Good-night, then," he said awkwardly.

"Good night," she answered. There was not even a kiss between them. He had been full of penitence and gratitude to her for letting him come here, of pleasure at being home again. But now he felt something of reaction, and thought of his father, to whom she must many times have been cold like this. He never guessed that she was more glad than he in his home-coming, half ashamed of what she only half realised, young passion in an old heart, a dry old heart that had not known it before. So few sons know how their mothers love them. And this one less than any other, because of the circumstances that had kept them apart.

Perhaps naturally, it was not of his mother Desmond thought when he went to bed without kissing her, but of Eunice. She had greeted him as a sister, warmly, lovingly; *she* had not omitted to kiss him. "But she isn't my sister, and thank God for that!" was his last waking thought. He was very happy.

The next day and the next Eunice hung about him, told him everything that had happened during his absence, even about the Orchid and a belated spike.

"Auntie is sure it's going to flower now. Sanders says 'it's wakin' up to its work.' Jack Reid is coming over this afternoon. Michael's sisters, and me, and the two Campden boys make five; there's you and Michael, Billy Norland, and two boys from the vicarage. Can't we have a tournament on

Saturday, Desmond, like we had at Denham? We've only got a few more. Isn't it lucky we've got an asphalt court?"

"Billy" Norland was the Rev. William Norland, curate, supposed to be casting sheep's eyes at one of the McKays. Eunice told Desmond about it. To her it did not appear romantic or sentimental; it was only funny. She was younger even than her years, and less developed.

"We are going to have a picnic to-morrow; that's what I chose for my birthday, although Auntie said no one had ever heard of a picnic in March. We are going to have it in the woods—our woods; but we could have the tournament on Saturday. The McKays are staying till Monday. After that, Desmond, after that we'll go together to all our old places."

She hung about him, talked, made plans. But, except on that first evening, she had not kissed him. There was no reason why she should not, no reason in her own mind. Perhaps Desmond thought he was too old for kissing. She had instincts, although she was without reason. She was satisfied to have him there.

The house was full of guests those few days; luncheon parties, dinner parties, continual games. Lady Grindelay wished to put off for the present the talk she thought inevitable between herself and her son. He was never out of her mind.

He was anxious to propitiate her, intermittently attentive. But, of course, she was not his first interest, if he was hers. She would not have believed it if she had been told she was jealous of the girl's place with him. She thought she was only intent on carrying out what she had decided was her duty and inevitable, fulfilling her trust.

"You must not neglect your other guests for Desmond," she told Eunice. "Desmond is at home here." Eunice had come into her room before she was up, to ask if she and Desmond could go on the river before breakfast.

"If you do go, take Michael with you. Michael is fond of rowing." This was on Saturday.

They did not go, for the presence of Michael would have spoiled everything. They would wait until Monday, until he

went away again. Eunice and Desmond liked best to be alone. Eunice, at least, had always known that. Yet those seventeen years, all warm and sunlit, had been so guarded that there were no seeds sown, and none could sprout, of comprehension of that which was so near her, making every day more beautiful than the last.

The full days fled. The picnic was a success. The tennis tournament took place. Michael and Madge Reid won it. Desmond had never played so badly.

"You're out of practice," Eunice said to him consolingly. Desmond knew better, but he was in no mood to question why it was he missed ball after ball, why his muscles were relaxed and he wanted to dream, not to play games.

On Monday the McKays were to go. Lady Grindelay, at the last moment, suggested Michael should prolong his holiday. Andrew must go, the office called him, he could not be alone in that big house in Campden Hill. The girls had their various avocations, their housekeeping, sewing classes, what not. But Michael, conscientious Michael, who had so few holidays, could surely prolong this one. Never had there been a March so like May, one could see a misty veil of green already on the trees.

Michael would not stay, would not neglect his father or his work, but said that if Lady Grindelay permitted he would come up and down daily. It was only an hour from town, the trains were good.

Michael was satisfied that his wooing progressed, although he felt the time was not ripe for speaking. Perhaps it would ripen when the spring was fully here. He never thought of Desmond as a rival, no more than if he had been Eunice's young brother. Desmond was not yet twenty, and had not started on a career. In Michael's well-ordered mind these were sufficient reasons to deter him from thinking of love or marriage.

Michael went regularly up to town, and Desmond and Eunice spent the lengthening days together. They wanted nothing more than to be left alone. Desmond was alive, although timid, to what it meant—this happiness in being

together with Eunice. She believed it was just as it had always been, no different. She had never had a companion who could compare with Desmond. He was quieter than he used to be; she liked being with him even more.

Again they sat on the mossy ground, under the spreading branches of some old tree, bird-haunted in the summer, bare now, but familiar. Again she went with him on the river, one day even as far as the rafts at Dawney. It was holiday time at Eton, and the shouting boys in their shorts were absent, but the atmosphere remained and reminded him. He visited all the Eton tradesmen, gave liberal orders, was quite a boy that afternoon.

They resented the evenings when Michael followed them to the billiard-room, or sat with them in the conservatory; the week-ends, when he was with them all the time.

"He's so much nearer auntie's age. I wonder he doesn't keep more with her," Eunice complained. Michael was twenty-eight! But they were well-bred young people, good-natured, and sorry for him because his life could not be passed like theirs.

"I wonder he can stand being in a stuffy office ten months out of every twelve. I should think he'd get blue mould on him. But I suppose he likes it."

"Perhaps he did it to please his father," she suggested.

"I'd as soon be an undertaker as a lawyer."

"You! But you're so different, Desmond. I think we ought to be very nice to him, to try and make things up to him."

"So we are. Aren't I teaching him to row, although he has no more muscle than a tadpole?"

"You will go on being nice to him?"

"Of course I will, if you want me to, although he's a nuisance."

That was what Desmond said at first, until he saw why Michael came.

"He is so pleased always to be here, and he says such nice things to me."

"What sort of things?"

"Things out of books, and that I'm like a flower."

"He has sense enough to see that."

Their eyes met; she coloured, but did not know why, and laughed for the same reason. That was when Desmond began to suspect why Michael came so often.

Michael, liking to be with them, meaning to fall in with their ways, wishing to be as light as they, although natural gaiety was foreign to his temperament, let Desmond teach him to feather his oars, bend his knees, throw back his shoulders, while Eunice instructed him in wood lore. Michael, most estimable of young men, tall and stiff and a little Scotch, with his eyeglass and unblemished record, his high degree and medal, was not a good wooer, could not have been, or Eunice would surely have perceived his intentions. She classed him with the *Odontoglossum* and other things that interested her aunt.

It was not until she and Desmond quarrelled about him, until she had to defend him, that she really began to think about him at all, and then it was in anything but the way he would have wished.

"He says the same things over and over again," she told Desmond. "When he said:

'Even the weariest river
Winds somewhere safe to tea'

this afternoon, I nearly laughed. He said it last Saturday and the Saturday before."

"Couldn't he see we don't want him? I wonder how long he is going to come up and down. Why doesn't he stick to the office?" Desmond asked, forgetting but a few days ago he had been sympathetic with Michael's mode of life, willing to lighten it for him. Eunice reminded him:

"But it must be so wonderful for him to be here after sitting in an office all day. We've got to remember that, to go on making it as pleasant as possible."

"I don't suppose he would have sat in an office unless he wanted. He has always been a sap. And he is so cursed polite."

"Well, you're not," she answered merrily. They were on the river together, and there were hours before Michael would appear again. "You were very short with him yesterday, and said he would never be anything of an oar."

"Why should I be polite to him? It isn't me he wants to be with; it's you."

She laughed, a young, incredulous laugh.

"He likes to be with us both, it's because we are gayer than he is. It doesn't matter which of us it is, as long as he hasn't to discuss orchids or the village schools, or the new drainage, with auntie."

She believed every word she said. A few days later Desmond broke out again:

"Why does he call you my 'sister'? It's cheek of him." He mimicked the words. 'Perhaps your sister will do me the honour to play with me next Saturday instead of with you? Miss Reid, I am sure, will be proud of your partnership.' What does he mean by interfering? We'll play the same match or not at all."

"It would make a better game if I played with Michael. You are so out of form, and I was never very good."

Desmond argued the matter, spoke insultingly of Michael, called him a Cockney, alluded to his tactlessness. "Shoving himself where he wasn't wanted." Eunice defended him wonderingly. It was strange for Desmond to be ill-tempered with her.

The match was played as Michael proposed. Desmond recovered his form on that occasion, and Mary Reid played up to him. They won easily. After it was over, Desmond said, rather more exultantly than the occasion demanded:

"You didn't do so well without me, after all, did you? It wasn't such a walk-over for you and McKay. You'd better stick to me another time if you want to win."

Michael answered for her, answered quickly:

"I am sure your sister—I am sure Miss Eunice doesn't mind being beaten."

"Can't she speak for herself?"

"What is the matter with you, Desmond?" Eunice asked.

"Nothing is the matter with me." He spoke furiously.

Michael put in another word, intended to be conciliatory. Desmond replied intemperately, and they all decided he was better left alone.

"We'll play the final another day," Michael said soothingly, as Desmond left the court. But Eunice went after him, slipping an arm into his.

"Why are you so cross, Desmond? I didn't do it on purpose. Did you think I wanted you to win? I really did play my best."

"What does he mean by calling you my sister?" Desmond answered savagely. "What does he mean by telling me whether you care or not about being beaten? Don't I know you better than he does? Why is he always interfering between us?"

"Why shouldn't he call me your sister?"

"He's trying to make up to you, bringing you boxes of sweets, books you don't read——"

"Yes, I do; really I do, some of them."

"When mother insists."

"Auntie never insists," she answered quickly.

"I believe she's throwing you at the fellow's head."

"What *do* you mean?"

But he had no explanation ready, and was sullen half the day and during Sunday, until Michael went away on Monday morning in fact.

The next evening he began again on the same subject. It was wet. Michael had telegraphed that business detained him in town, and they had the billiard-room to themselves. They were not playing, because whilst Desmond had been away things had got into disorder, and he had all the cues to mend, the tops had dropped off many of them. They had been talking of the cues. Without anything to lead up to the subject he began again about Michael.

"I believe he does it on purpose. 'Your sister and your sister and your sister.' He knows we're only cousins. Hardly that, for your mother was only my mother's stepsister."

"Does it matter?" she asked wonderingly. "We've always been the same."

"But we are not brother and sister," he said doggedly, not meeting her eyes, going on with the cues. "Where's the glue? I wish you'd pass it me. It's in the fireplace." She brought it over to him, remaining by his side.

"We are practically no relations."

"It's just the same." She came a little closer to him.

"It isn't."

"I couldn't be fonder of you if I were your real sister." She was holding the glue-pot, but found her heart beating more quickly than usual.

"Are you fonder of me than you are of Michael McKay?"

"I shouldn't care if I never saw Michael McKay again. Go on with the cue. Why are you stopping? It wants holding down—pressing."

"I'm not in the humour for it, I'm sick of it. I suppose he'll be coming down again to-morrow—standing between us." He spoke gloomily, and she answered quickly, her cheeks flushing.

"As if anything could come between us."

"You mean it?"

"Of course I do." He meant to have gone on, to have asked her how much better she liked him than she did Michael. But now, as once or twice before, he became tongue-tied by her nearness; his beating heart stopped his words; he could not bear her so near him.

"As if we could ever like anybody better than we do each other!" she said. And then an extraordinary silence fell between them; she felt her cheeks burning.

"Let's go out on the terrace; it's left off raining." She wanted the darkness of the terrace that he should not notice her cheeks burning or her voice trembling. Neither of them was ready for that which was so near them. It was quite in his accustomed manner he said:

"All right. Just wait until I put these things away to dry. I'll have another go at them the next wet day."

CHAPTER IX

NOTHING in nature stands still, least of all young love between a girl and a boy.

Lady Grindelay knew so many things—rose and orchid culture, drainage, what standard a little girl of seven should have attained, and that she should wear her hair in a neat plait; knew about silos, Berkshire pigs and Alderney cows. She prided herself upon the variety of her interests, upon keeping abreast with the times, sympathising with the Women's Movement, still in its infancy, trying to understand Socialism and the trend of politics. The only thing completely hidden from her was the human heart, even her own. A misgiving she may have had, but now that she had decided Eunice should marry Michael, she would not allow herself to dwell upon it. Eunice was one of those girls for whom marriage was indicated. Why, then she should marry Andrew's son, and the sooner the better. A sexless woman lives in a perpetual twilight, with no dawn of roseate sun to lighten it. Love! The word was even strange on her lips. She was not prudish, only ignorant, with a sense lacking.

Eunice should marry, since she already showed an inclination for it. But not Desmond. Agatha's conscience held the reins of her intelligence and drove her unceasingly. Day and night she thought of her son, and of what she could do to cure him of the desire for strong drink. Her tenderness tunnelled deep, until all the foundations of her strength were shaken—shaken, but still standing. He must be disciplined, strengthened, helped. It was the task for a mother, not for a gentle girl like Eunice, Eunice was to be guarded from trouble.

Lady Grindelay, planning for both of them, abandoning what had been her dearest wish, and without a doubt that she was doing right, never saw that this early spring was different from all the springs of Desmond's and Eunice's childhood. The woods held their secret, the sap rising in the pines

scented their path, the chaffinch sang early on the elm, the blackbird on the thorn, the March winds blew as softly as if it were May, and all for them.

Michael came steadily wooing, and everybody knew it but the subject of his attentions.

Lady Grindelay was without a doubt that as she and Andrew had settled it so it would come about. Her feeling towards the girl had ebbed a little, leaving dry places. Michael would be kind to her; his character was steady, his principles were high; he was the husband she needed. Lady Grindelay planned in her twilight. What was between Desmond and Eunice grew in the sunshine under budding leaves, or where the river washed the banks among the reeds.

There came a day when it broke into words, an eventful day; but it was Lady Grindelay who hastened the speaking.

Desmond, because as yet nothing different had been decided, went as arranged to Oxford for his examination. He was away only the inside of a week, but he grudged the time, grudged every minute he was not feeling the pulsing strength of his growing manhood, the love that was not part, but the whole of it. Because his heart was so full—not, as the examiners thought, because his mind was so empty—he failed to pass, to answer the questions put to him, to concentrate on them. He was ploughed for his “Little Go.”

The news came to him at breakfast. He opened the letter, exclaimed at its contents, put it at the side of his plate, went on eating. Eunice wondered a little at the way Desmond took the news, admiring him for his calmness. Lady Grindelay said nothing.

“After all, I don’t think I should have cared much about Oxford,” he said carelessly. “Pass the marmalade, Eunice. It’s not as if I was going into a profession. I don’t see what I should have done there.”

Lady Grindelay got up from the breakfast-table without comment. She was not entirely unprepared for what had happened.

Later on Eunice found her in the drawing-room, engaged in needlework.

"I'm going into the town, auntie. Desmond wants some fishing-lines. We are going to row down and have the carriage to meet us at the lock. Is there any shopping you want done?"

Lady Grindelay was sitting at her frame. The Wansteads had all been famous for their embroideries, and Lady Grindelay, notwithstanding her many interests and occupations, had always found time to exercise her gifts of even stitch and unbroken patience. It was her answer to Tolstoi's "what is Art?"—the expression of her limited lyricism. Perhaps the happiest hours of Agatha's life had been spent translating rare orchids in water-colours, and thence to silk or satin by orderly stitch.

Eunice repeated her question.

"Didn't you say you wanted another skein or two of the yellow?" She was interested in her aunt's work, and bent over the frame. She, too, worked sometimes, copying needlework pictures, keeping up the traditions of the house. "It is getting on wonderfully. You ought to show it to Sanders."

"It" was a mauve and yellow orchid with a purple lip, and they spoke about the needed silks for a few moments. Lady Grindelay made a French knot or two, put her head on one side and examined the effect. Then she said:

"I should like to speak to Desmond before you go. You are not in any immediate hurry, are you?"

Eunice hesitated.

Lady Grindelay laid out her silks in order, straightening the skeins.

"You are not angry with Desmond, are you?" She hesitated, but went on: "It wasn't Desmond's fault; he couldn't help it. He would have passed all right if he had gone up before he left Eton."

"It is quite possible."

"Are you going to say anything to him?" She made a tentative effort to help with the sorting. "You are short of the darkest purple, too."

"I want to know what he is going to do, what are his plans."

Desmond, following the girl into the room, for he could not bear just now that she should be out of his sight, answered for himself lightly:

"My plans are to get down to the boat as quickly as possible. As it is, we shall hardly get back in time for lunch."

"I should like a few words with you." His mother was still handling the silks.

"Won't it do after lunch? It's getting so late."

"Just as you please; but perhaps——"

They did not allow her to finish her sentence; they were off before she found the shade of purple of which she needed another skein.

"All right, then. Come on, Eunice."

Eunice bade her a hasty good-bye, and went so quickly at Desmond's impatient bidding that she forgot the pattern altogether.

"We won't be late," she called back from the door. "I'll make him hurry."

Lady Grindelay disliked unpunctuality, as she did any other form of disorder. The years had fixed her in her old-maidish habits.

All the morning she spent by herself, embroidering, going over the lines of that conversation she must have with her son. Some occupation must be found for him, and he would have to be persuaded to it. One in which there were few or no temptations. In none of the professions was teetotalism a qualification. But she racked her brains to think of one in which strong drink would be contra-indicted. There was the Church. But she could not picture Desmond in canonicals. All the time she was considering the Bar, the Church, farming in Canada, or representing his county in Parliament, at the back of her mind was the knowledge that there was only one profession for such as he. All the time, too, her heart contracted, and she feared that to which she must persuade him. He must be a soldier, disciplining himself first, then others. But what she wanted was to keep him near

her. Because she wanted it she must not do it. Perhaps in the years to come, the far-distant years. . . . She pictured him disciplined, and even distinguished, returning to Marley. Then she would walk proudly, holding on to his arm. She habitually forgot her age, feeling still young and vigorous, as if her days would never end.

In the afternoon, when Desmond, as arranged, came in to talk to her, she had it all fully planned. He suggested lightly that Eunice should join their conference, but Lady Grindelay decided otherwise.

"Michael will be down at five. Eunice can go in the carriage to meet him. You might go a little earlier, and get me the silk you forgot this morning," she said to the girl. It did not seem suitable she should stay while Desmond's future was being discussed; it was better she should go to meet her own.

"I am sorry I forgot the silk." Eunice was really contrite, anxious to make amends for her forgetfulness. "If I go now there will still be light enough."

"We shan't be very long over our talk, shall we?" Desmond asked. "She can wait, can't she, and then I can drive in with her?"

"I don't think she had better delay; the dusk falls early."

"Of course I won't wait for Desmond. It was horrid of me to forget it this morning. I'll go now."

But when she had left them, Lady Grindelay seemed in no haste to speak. Desmond watched his mother for a few minutes, wondering about her. Agatha retained her figure, she had grown old in the way trees grow, was mature and without a sign of decay. Her hair was grey, but it was a wiry and vigorous grey; although there were fine lines about her eyes, the eyes were still young. Mothers and sons should not wonder about each other; they should know. Desmond knew little of his mother, except that she was for ever surprising him, and, he thought, perhaps criticising him. She had never, for instance, said one word to him about his behaviour at Languedoc. Perhaps, after all, she understood. She had always been generous to him, never nagged him, like other fellows' mothers, but then she had never——

Desmond actually flushed when he thought how different other fellows' mothers were from his. Lady John, for instance, rumbled up Edric's hair and scolded him, kissed him before everyone. Jeffrey Campden thought nothing of putting his arm round his mother's waist or about her shoulders, and anyone could see how well she liked it. Mrs. Reid never talked of anyone else but Jack, and all the examinations he passed, what his tutors wrote about him. She cackled about him, Desmond thought, like a hen with one chicken. Up at the parsonage, too, where many of the children were still small, Mrs. Montgomery was never without one clinging to her skirt or in her arms. When the big ones came back from school or university, she could not make enough of them. Of course, he knew how superior Lady Grindelay was to Lady Campden, or Mrs. Reid, or Mrs. Montgomery. Still, there were times when what a fellow wants from his mother is not superiority. Then he had one sickening moment of remembrance and longing for his father, for poor old drunken Pat and his ready sympathy. Before it had died away he began to speak hurriedly.

Agatha was still embroidering. She drew a long thread through the taut silk on the frame, and held her needle poised again whilst she listened. Her own opening she had not yet decided upon.

"Mother, you wanted to speak to me. But there is something I want to get in first. I suppose you are sick over this exam.? It was only because I got thinking of something else. . . ."

She laid down her needle, and looked up at him. His face had grown thin and the light in his blue eyes was restless; his colour came and went. All of a sudden he had made up his mind to tell her, if he could get it out, to ask her sympathy, show her what was in his heart. After all, she *was* his mother. Somewhere out of sight and deep down he had an idea she was but unlike those other mothers on the surface. He was her only son.

"After all, you know, I don't really want to go to Oxford.

What's the good of attending lectures and all the rest of it?" He spoke a little nervously.

"No?" she said inquiringly. "No? Then what is it you wish to do? That is what I detained you to ask. It is time we spoke of it. But you are beforehand with me. Tell me what you have in your mind."

Thinking she understood, would meet him half-way, he said boldly:

"I want to stay on here."

She smiled.

"And that is what I, too, should like best." He returned her smile. "But is it best for you? That is what we have to think. Your education still incomplete, no definite occupation. . . ."

"Couldn't I look after the estate, hunt and shoot, do what other fellows in my position do, even if it is a little earlier?"

"But you are not quite like other fellows." Her sigh was involuntary. He paid no heed to it.

"Oh, that's nothing. Because I've got a title——"

"I was not thinking of your title." She was astonished that he should think of that. To her it seemed that to be Lord Grindelay was so much less than to be a Wanstead, Squire of Marley.

"Mother!"

He stammered, stopped, and she looked at him in surprise, then dropped her eyes, for she thought he was going to say something of what was between them, of his sottish father and his own weakness. When the words came from him they came like a torrent, but not at all what she expected. At first she could hardly gather what he was saying, he spoke so quickly.

"I want to stay here and marry Eunice. I know I'm young and all that. I don't mean at once. But other men are after her, I can't be forestalled. There's Michael, now, Michael McKay. He's fooling about, and it's easy to see what he wants. I'm not going to stand it." He spoke with a kind of furious, agitated heat, went on pouring out his grievance and his desire.

"It isn't as if she's even grown up. It's not the right thing to do; it's a rotten shame. I've never said a word to her myself. He makes eyes at her, pays her compliments, says she's like a flower." The fluctuating colour now burned more steadily. "It isn't fair; it's beastly. I want him to know; I want you to tell him that Eunice and I—Eunice and I——" He ran short of words, his eyes pleading and bright, his heart knocking.

"Eunice and you?" She repeated the words after him almost mechanically. "Eunice and you! But that is impossible. I dare not . . . you must not . . ."

"I know I've got to wait. I haven't said anything to her, but no one else must interfere between us. What's he hanging about for, if it isn't that? You see for yourself I can't go to Oxford, or leave her, whilst he's hanging about."

She tried to thread her silk, although her hands were shaking.

"You think I'm too young?"

"No, it was not that." Her tongue was dry, she had not thought it would be necessary to explain things to him.

"What is it, then?"

"You are so untried. . . ." She could not hurt him or speak more freely. "Perhaps if I had known of this wish of yours before——" She hesitated, the truth was impossible of utterance. "Now I have given my promise to Michael."

"To Michael McKay?" he replied incredulously.

"Yes."

"I suppose you never thought of me at all?" he said furiously. "I suppose I don't count?"

She could not bear to feel his young fury turned against her.

"I had to think of her." She was not speaking with authority, but hesitatingly, almost incoherently.

"Why shouldn't you?" And then he stopped abruptly. "You've been holding that—that time at Languedoc against me?"

"I have not been holding it against you. I had to think of what was right. You are so young," she faltered.

He broke in:

"There is one thing—she wouldn't look at him."

She was struggling against a force she did not understand, as unwilling to speak to him of his infirmity as if she had to break to him that he was deformed or disabled.

"He is very steady and reliable." She was very sorry for Desmond, and distressed. But her conscience stifled her heart, and, although she would give him everything, she knew she must not give him Eunice, not the girl to whom now she felt curiously cold and estranged, but who had been left in her care, and whom she must protect.

Doggedly, for now he caught a glimpse of the high wall of her resistance, and meant to climb it, he went on:

"I am going to marry Eunice." His face went pale. "You can't prevent me. I can do what I like when I am of age."

She began a sentence about a woman's needs, and that she should be able to look up to her husband; of how awful it is when a woman must submit herself to her husband, despising him; she got out a desperate half word about what it is to be a wife and see a man you have sworn to love and obey reel into your room.

He gazed at her in surprise, then gathered she was speaking of his father.

"I must protect her," she said painfully. "You must see that." Desmond resented the allusion to his father, that he should be dragged in. He answered rudely, but quickly and without thought:

"You won't make her do it, for all you say. She doesn't care for Michael any more than for a dead dog. She'll never marry him."

"I am sorry," Lady Grindelay began, and stopped.

"I don't want your pity. Why should you be sorry for me? There is nothing the matter with me."

"I know it is only weakness. You will be cured—you shall be cured."

"Never!"

It choked him to say the next words; he had never said

them to Eunice, nor she to him, the words in which he must make his mother understand. His voice was husky and his eyes suffused.

"We—we care for each other."

He walked into the conservatory after having said it, staying there to recover himself. When he came back into the room his mother was sitting as he had left her. He came swiftly to her, stood close beside her.

"Mother, you don't mean to keep us apart? I know, of course I know you were unhappy with my father; but because of that you don't want *me* to be unhappy?"

He could hardly hear her reply; the pale lips formed the words, but he could hardly hear them.

"No, I do not want you to be unhappy. I could not bear that you should be unhappy. But you and I—we have not only ourselves to think of. We must make sacrifices."

"Not this?" His own voice was low.

"We have to think of her—you and I. It is dreadful for you, I know, to—to give her up."

"I am not going to give her up. Mother, I—I love her."

But he felt despairingly that his mother did not know what was this love of which he was telling her, how it paralysed his tongue and made his mouth dry, how beyond words it was.

She would have come into all the kingdom of her motherhood with one touch of comprehension, one half word of sympathy. In the silence he began to hope. Never before had he appealed to her, not in this way, not in words, only dumbly or sullenly, and she had never quite heard or understood the call; there was so much between them. Now, having spoken, hope rose, poised like a butterfly wing on his dry lips.

"I want Eunice. I—I want her for my wife."

She would have given her to him, thrown her to the wolves, for that was the way she regarded it, only for her conscientiousness, her sense of duty that was no sense at all.

"I want you to send Michael away—to help me."

She knew—she knew already that she loved him better than anything on earth, and would have given him her own

heart to play with. But not Eunice's. She had to be true to her trust.

"I cannot send Michael away." Her voice was low. "There is nothing I would not do for you, nor give you." She who had not known what passion meant felt her heart beating passionately now. Memories of past shame and humiliation scorched her cheek, burned in her eyes. "Only not Eunice. I—I dare not. I promised her mother to guard her."

"And why not? Why not?" he cried.

It was she who appealed to him now.

"How can I let her bear what I have borne? I promised her mother to take care of her. You say I must not pity you. But if the time came when I must pity her, and know that it was I who had connived at her unhappiness! How could I bear it? She is not as strong as I. Yet I, with my strength"—he saw the colour flush her, as if she were suffering still—"could not endure it, was compelled to leave him—my self-respect. . . ."

"But I—I——" His voice was incredulous. "What has that to do with it?"

She could hardly speak, but knew she could only help him by telling him what it was he had to fight. He stood before her, flushed and incredulous, angry. In her heart she was rocking and soothing him, for all she was so inarticulate. She wanted to dull and still the pain of the things she must say.

"I will help you, help you all that is possible, against yourself. But you must understand; I have never spoken of this before, but now you force me. Already, as with him, drink tempts you, and you yield. You say you must have her—you *must*! He was like that, without principle or self-restraint. What he wanted he—he *took* . . ."

"But I am not like that." He was angry, very angry, but because he saw she suffered he kept a restraint over himself.

"You don't know yourself. How should you? But that was what he did—drank, and took what he wanted . . ." Her voice failed; she was remembering dreadful things.

"I am not like that—and I don't believe he was either," he repeated, almost to himself.

"You came to me drunk—*drunk*, on the day of your father's funeral!"

"It was the first time in my life—the only time. I thought you had forgiven me."

"Forgiven! I had not to forgive you, only myself, that I had given you this inheritance, this father. Loose living, loose thinking, jesting about vice——" There was a sob in her throat.

"Don't, mother, don't!"

She was ashamed—ashamed of his shame and humiliation. But he? There struggled through his anger something of exultation. If it was from those things she would protect Eunice, he was with her heart and soul, he was with her in desiring it. He was hot to tell her he was no drunkard, and for loose living or loose talk he had as great an abhorrence as she, that he knew no kisses but those from the soft lips of his cousin. He wanted that all these things should be clear to her, that she should know his reverence for the girl, *how* he cared about her. He was shaken with the thought of the greatness of his love, and drew nearer to his mother. In another moment he would have told her, or tried to tell her.

But she gave him no time. Already the interview had touched deeper issues than she had been prepared for. She got up now, abruptly, before he had time to speak or approach her.

"We won't speak of it any more, if you don't mind. Not yet, not until you have thought things over. You tell me you have said nothing to her. You will not do so now?"

Thrown back upon himself and silenced, in the reaction and surprise he answered quickly:

"I am not going to make any promises."

"I think I hear the carriage. Isn't that the carriage coming back?"

It was impossible to say anything further then. Eunice

was in the hall, and Michael with her; their voices could be heard, and Eunice's laughter. She broke into the room.

"I've got the silk and Michael."

She looked quickly from one to another.

"There is nothing the matter, is there?"

"What should be the matter?" Lady Grindelay asked, and welcomed Michael fittingly. Desmond found it more difficult to regain his self-possession.

CHAPTER X

THIS was in the spring of 1899. There was great unrest in South Africa, and for some time past Kruger had been making the position impossible to Englishmen. He had been showing his teeth, and everywhere but officially, in the War Office, it was known he had also been buying guns. We were displaying our usual official urbanity, and certain parliamentarians were under the impression that the situation could be cleaned up with soft soap. Diplomacy might still have succeeded, but faddists on both sides of the House hung on the arms of negotiators, impeding progress, delaying everything but the preparations of the Boers. Our army, of course, was unready. When is the British Army ready for war? is a conundrum to which the answer has not yet been found. But young officers at all stations were becoming hopeful of opportunity for showing their quality. That there might be an insufficiency of these was a contingency that was slowly stirring up the stagnant minds of the old dotards at the War Office. That spring there was already a sensible augmentation in the ranks of the probationers, who were rushed through a short course of training in riding, shooting, and musketry practice, tactics, and what not. The diploma of a commission was given readily to youth and ignorance. The effect was not fully known until a series of disasters, holocausts of soldiers, began to bring it home.

This, however, is only incidentally concerned with the story of Desmond and his mother.

Lady Grindelay, of course, did not believe in the war. Few English mothers did at that time. But when, at dinner that evening, Michael spoke of the talk at the London clubs, how everyone thought the old man, Oom Paul, should be given a lesson, and what a difference it was making in the number of recruits, Lady Grindelay noticed how Desmond's eyes lit up and how, now and again, his colour rose. Although throughout her life she made so many sad and irretrievable

mistakes, she was not dull witted. This seemed to her to be a way out of the immediate difficulty. If Desmond could be led or persuaded to enter the Army, the rest would happen naturally. Michael could be trusted to make good his opportunities. And Desmond would be under discipline. This was what he needed. The late Lord Grindelay had been his own master from early boyhood; uncontrolled at the most critical period of his life. It was imperative Desmond should be differently placed. Therefore, she encouraged Michael to talk of the war that was coming, admitted that she too saw there might be no other way out, and expressed the opinion that all the young men who had not yet chosen a profession would make a rush for the Army.

"The Campdens are fortunate with their sons. Edric has his commission, and Jeffrey is already at Sandhurst."

"I suppose you are sorry now that you were not in the Army Class at Eton?" Michael asked Desmond. Except when it was a question of sport or field-lore, it was in the foreground of Michael's mind that Desmond was a boy still, many years younger than himself.

Desmond, antagonistic towards him, contradicted him without hesitation.

"No, I'm not. It is a rotten way to get into the Army."

"Desmond is not anxious for military glory," Lady Grindelay said, always with the same objective.

"I shouldn't mind going into the Army," he answered her, a little sullenly.

"At least, you have never shown any strong leaning towards it."

"Yes, he has. Over and over again he has said he would like to be a soldier," Eunice put in eagerly.

"That was before there was any talk of war," Michael answered, with an attempt at humour; and quoted, according to habit, "I was with Grant, the stranger said, two years before the war."

"I suppose you would chuck the law if there was any chance of fighting?" Desmond retorted.

"Michael has his father to think of. Your father tells

me he leaves much in your hands already," Lady Grindelay put in, to cover her son's aggressiveness.

The next day and the next the possibilities of war were discussed. Another tennis tournament was held, and while the youngsters played, the fathers and mothers sat in the drawing-room, or walked in the garden, or round the hot-houses, and spoke of little else. Lady Grindelay, without any belief in the probability of our great country being defied or drawn into battle by a handful of Dutch farmers, concealed her opinion, and spoke of the duty of being prepared. Desmond, sauntering into the room when all the guests were gone and his mother and Eunice sat together, showed he was at the point to which she had led him.

"All this war talk is jolly rot—a handful of Boer farmers! If I thought there was anything in it, I'd have a shot for the Army myself."

"You'd look splendid in a uniform. Lady John showed me Edric's portrait. You'd go into the Guards, wouldn't you?"

"I never saw anything like the fuss you all made of Edric to-day," he answered. "I'm too old for Sandhurst," he added inconsequently.

"I don't think so," Lady Grindelay answered quietly.

"Then you wouldn't mind?" Eunice cried.

"I should not like to think of my son hanging back if his country had need of him."

"Nobody is braver than Desmond."

Lady Grindelay smiled, smiled because Eunice was so quick in his defence. Desmond thought she smiled because she doubted that too. He was little more than a boy; he had not yet come to his full height, the stature of his wisdom, or the measure of his ambition. Yesterday he could think of nothing but Eunice and the sweetness of her, of his own throbbing pulses and restless nights. To-day, at the thought of "those beggars, the Boers, forbidding Englishmen in Johannesburg to bear arms," his blood fired. If there was to be a war, he was not the one to stay at home and read about it.

When he was alone with his mother he said, à propos of nothing:

"I don't suppose I could get into Sandhurst without a coach?"

"There would be no difficulty about that," she answered.

"If it were not for Eunice——" he began again.

"I should have thought that was an additional reason."

She meant that because he could not marry his cousin, it would be a good way of putting her out of his mind if he decided even now, late though it was, to try to get into the Army. He needed discipline. She did not believe there would be a war.

It came about quickly. Afterwards Lady Grindelay knew she forced it to come about. She managed that Michael should not come down again whilst Desmond was still undecided. When she saw that Desmond thought she doubted his courage, and that it helped to his decision, she was careful not to reassure him. She told everyone of his decision before he had made it.

"My son thinks if there is any chance of a war, he must at least be in a position to take part in it."

She had no misgiving, only a great throb of gratitude to the Jameson raiders and Kruger for having forwarded her plans. She would take Eunice abroad when Desmond was with his coach in London. Michael's wooing would be done as well at Aix-le-Bains or Dinard as here. Desmond had said Eunice knew nothing of his feelings for her, and Lady Grindelay decided it was best she should never know them. She thought she was acting in Desmond's best interest, and yet not neglecting her duty to Eunice. Eunice must be safely married, or at least engaged to Michael McKay, whilst Desmond was learning to be a soldier. He would get over his wish to marry Eunice; it was only a boyish fancy. Boyish fancy! That was the phrase with which Agatha masked her ignorance, with which she set herself to circumvent that which was as capable of circumvention as the winding of a river to the sea.

When she heard that Blathwayt Bird would take Des-

mond, and that there were ways and means of getting over the fact that he would be a few months over age at the time of the examination, she professed astonishment that Desmond still hesitated.

"I thought you had quite made up your mind; but, of course, if you prefer the Bar——"

"Not me!"

"I thought I was carrying out your views! No doubt Mr. Bird can get someone in your place. But it is running it a little close; the term begins in a week——"

"In a week! I can't leave here in a week."

"Why not?"

"You can't kick me out like that."

"Kick you out? What an extraordinary way you have of talking! I really understood it was your desire to be with your friends, that the probability of having to go to South Africa was not a deterrent to you."

"Of course it isn't."

"Then?"

"Oh! I'm going right enough."

His temper was uneven, he was not always quite respectful; he was really torn this way and the other, and undecided. But Michael stayed away, and Desmond was fairly sure of Eunice. If he had not set them in motion, at least he acquiesced in the arrangements that were so quickly made for him.

Harried and driven, with the parting so near at hand, the promise he had never given became at all hazards the one he must break. He was not going away from Eunice for six, or it might be eight, months without speaking to her; not going to leave the way clear for Michael McKay or anybody else.

His mother, having brought him to the point she desired, had nothing more to do but keep the young people apart. He saw what she was about, and that in these few hurried days he and Eunice were never alone together, were like driven partridges before her.

Love did not laugh at locksmiths on this occasion; love, exemplified by Desmond, was in no laughing mood. He watched and waited, looking for opportunity; but in the end had to make his own, finding he had hesitated long enough.

Eunice was quite satisfied that Desmond was to be a soldier, picturing him in his smart uniform, calling him "Colonel," and teasing him. She was still quite happy, just as she had been all the summer, with a throbbing and excitable happiness.

It was a bore that her aunt was always with her and Desmond now, but, of course, it was natural, since he was going away so soon. She made innocent little efforts to dodge her, but they came to nothing. She did not understand she was being guarded, nor why they were never alone.

On Tuesday Desmond was to go to London, and already it was Sunday—the last Sunday of all.

On Sunday, in Marley old church, undismayed by the brasses and monuments of his ancestry, Desmond smuggled her a pencilled note, as he had done so often under the eyes of governess or tutor in more childish days. She read it as she knelt; the irreverence of it was nothing to the fun of feeling like a child again; she even smiled her appreciation to him, under the cover of her kneeling.

"We never get a chance by ourselves now. Get up at six to-morrow, and meet me in the spinney. I'll forage a basket, and we'll get lost in the woods. It's our last chance."

His last chance of meeting her alone, telling her what was in his heart. But it was not only the telling he had in his mind. He was not even quite sure what he would say, recognising the lingering quality of childhood in her. But he must warn her against Michael; that at least he was entitled to do.

They would have their last day in the woods together alone, visit each remembered haunt, be as they had always

been. He fretted under surveillance, and was upon his mettle to evade it.

He would go into the Army, for there was a chance of active service, but before he went he must say a word to Eunice, or half a word; he might get a promise from her.

At breakfast on Monday they were both missing.

Lady Grindelay was not in doubt of what had occurred, for Eunice, never negligent or careless, had left a little note:

“Desmond and I are going to say good-bye to everything. We’ve taken lunch with us. I know it’s rather awful of us to run away like this before anyone is up, but we did so want to be alone.”

Lady Grindelay disguised her dismay, hoping for the best.

“It is natural they should want to go round all their haunts; they have so many hiding-places in the woods, tame squirrels to feed, the boats to put away.” She kept reassuring herself, although with difficulty. If she could only have seen the boy without that which was really no part of him—his father’s vices—she could have acknowledged what he had become to her, perhaps even shown it. As it was, she was half glad he should have this day, and half ashamed, because she thought Eunice might suffer through it. She spent the day trying to forget all the horrible things her husband had told her about men who had been alone with young girls, comforting herself by thinking how different her son was to his father, and still young, that perhaps the stories his father had told her had not been true; having faith in him, only doubting herself, and whether she should have kept them apart more strictly.

Out of doors since six o’clock, drinking in the fine fresh fragrance of the early day, Desmond and Eunice revelled in their stolen freedom. They were on the river for half an hour before the sun was high, having it all to themselves, the broad, silver surface and dappled silence. They were again in the woods before noon, the food Desmond had foraged out-

spread ; nothing between them and complete happiness but the consciousness of to-morrow and the parting.

When lunch was over, they wandered under the green veiling of the interlacing trees, a little tired, their spirits a little overcast, talking of the days they had spent here in childhood. Desmond spoke of his unhappiness when he was a little boy, of his old home-sickness for Languedoc.

"Now it's Marley seems home to me," he added.

"There's no place like Marley."

"That's true ; but it was you taught it me."

"You weren't happy here at first?"

"Not until you made me so."

"Did I make you happy? I always wanted to. I knew you felt strange and shy."

"Was it shy you thought me?"

"Wild. I remember when you first came, and Uncle Andrew said you were like Struwwelpeter."

"No, that was the second time. The first time I had Biddy with me, my Irish nurse. She thought you were all against me—criticising me."

They talked of young memories, sentimentalising over them, perhaps. Their mood was sentimental, subdued.

"I shall often think of this day when I am away."

"So shall I."

"Will you?"

He was hardly conscious of what he was saying, for he had said nothing to her of what he had in his mind, and the time was getting late.

"Of course I shall."

"But you are going abroad ; you'll see many new sights and people. You'll have a lot to think of besides me."

"I always think of you when you're away ; I did when you were at Eton. Lately, too, when you stayed at Languedoc, and I knew you and auntie had quarrelled. I still think sometimes that you and auntie don't understand each other as well as you and I, or as well as auntie and I." She flushed a little when she had said that. "I used to cry about

it sometimes. It is so sad, because she is really your mother, and not mine." She paused, and added shyly, sweetly, "You won't think unkind things of her whilst we are away, will you? You used to think she did not care about you; you remember saying that. But it isn't true, Desmond. Auntie is all tender and loving inside, not a bit like she pretends to be. Besides, mothers must love their own children."

"Must they?" And then he added hastily, "I dare say you are right; I'm sure you are right. But she's got a funny way of showing it."

"She said whatever allowance the other young men had at Mr. Bird's, Uncle Andrew was to see you had as much or more. You were not to want for anything. She is going to open a banking account for you. I heard her talking about it. You know she's awfully generous."

"She'd give me anything but what I want most."

"What do you want most?" she asked quickly, looking up at him. She must have read something in his eyes, for the faint flush came again, and she did not press for a reply.

"Let's sit down here."

They sat on the gnarled roots of an ancient oak, and a silence fell between them, a silence like a shadow. But she could not long be shy with Desmond. She came near to him until their shoulders were almost touching.

"Don't be sad, Desmond. I can't bear to think you are going away sad. You always said you wanted to be a soldier. Yet, since this has been arranged, you haven't seemed a bit happy. Of course, it can't be because there may be a war——"

"Did she say that to you?" he asked hastily. "Is that what she thinks?"

"I don't know. Of course, if there was really a war we should neither of us want you to go."

"You'd have to put up with it then. No, it isn't because there might be a chance of active service. That's about the only inducement."

"What is it, then? I know you're not happy."

"Do you think Michael McKay will come out to you at

Aix or Dinard?" he asked irrelevantly and in a different tone.

"I know he will; I heard her ask him. What has that to do with it?"

"Nothing. Only I wanted to know. Tell me again. You missed me when I was away, used to be unhappy about me?"

"Yes, and about you and auntie not loving each other. I used to cry about it when I was alone in my bedroom at night, cry myself to sleep."

"You cried about me?"

"Yes. I never told anyone. But now everything is so different. You are going to learn to be a soldier, and you know you always wanted to be a soldier—you remember we used to play at soldiers? If it isn't the war, is it being in London, or the examination?"

She saw that he was unhappy as he had been in childhood's days, and crept nearer to him. The green shadow from the trees or some other shadow was upon his face, and she wanted to comfort him.

"Tell me why you look unhappy. I want you always to tell me everything."

"I will. I want to."

"We've always told each other everything—except about my crying in bed."

"Not quite, not lately. I've wanted to tell you something. It's—it's about Michael McKay. You haven't guessed, have you?"

"Guessed what?"

"Why Michael hangs about. Why he is coming out to you at Aix or Dinard. Why she has invited him."

"No." But she was apprehensive, the flush again staining her cheek.

"She wants you to marry Michael."

"Me!" She was amused, but her breath came quickly, smiling and a little derisive, but not utterly without belief. He put his arm about her.

"You never guessed?"

"It's so ridiculous!"

"Ridiculous, is it? I believe it is. You'd never marry anyone but me, would you? You'll wait for me, won't you?" His arm was about her, but her face was quickly hidden against his coat, and he had to stoop his head to hear her answer.

"They'll try and argue with you—persuade you. She said we were just like brother and sister."

"We're not?" Her voice was stifled.

"That's why I was angry with Michael for saying it. It's not true at all." She had to hide her face deeper. He whispered: "Tell me you're as glad about that as I am." She made no answer this time, her burning face was hidden, her beating heart frightened her.

"It's not that way I'm caring for you, nor you for me, is it? Tell me, tell me!"

She could not answer, sitting there in the encircling tenderness of his young arm, sweetly startled, sweetly afraid. Her heart was knocking out the answer all the time as if it were a spirit at a table-turning seance. But it was hardly her time to love; a minute ago she had been a child.

"I don't know, Desmond, I don't know," she faltered. "I'm afraid."

"You mustn't be afraid." He felt that she clung to him. "It's true then—that's all that matters. Is it true?"

An awe of it came upon him. It was true that they loved each other, and it was wonderful. They sat for a minute or two, holding each other. At last she raised her face to him, her child-lips trembling. His eyes were full of tears when he kissed her—so were hers—quickly. A thousand memories were between them in this surprising moment, childish memories. She had often cried in his arms or against his shoulder, been comforted roughly or tenderly. She had cried for a grazed knee, or a fall; a broken doll or some nursery tragedy; because he was going away to school, or he had said a hasty unkind word. These tears were different, he kissed them, his arms shook as he held her. She clung to him and her words were almost wild.

"Oh, Desmond! Is it true—is it really true?"

He saw how young she was, hardly old enough to hold this great truth. And then it was he proved himself a fine gentleman, not wild or undisciplined as his mother thought him, but a fine gentleman, chivalrous, sensitive, restrained. Her lips were there, but for all the temptation it was not there he answered her. His arm was about her waist, but he never drew her to him, for all his sudden hunger for her. He steadied himself and answered as soberly as if he were Michael.

"It is true. You won't forget it whilst I am away?"

"No."

"You won't marry Michael?"

"Never!"

"Promise!"

"I promise."

"You'll never marry anyone but me. You'll wait for me?"

"I promise."

"Honest Injun!"

"Honest Injun," she repeated.

It was the old childish oath that had never been broken, that was as solemn as a sacrament. They looked at each other, half laughing, but there was a solemnity about their laughter, and a difference. Then she said hurriedly, a little confused:

"It's getting late. Oughtn't we to be going back?"

"There's no going back on this," he answered agitatedly.

"I know."

She was as one caught unawares, her young feet unsteady in this radiant path; she wanted to hide, to get to shelter. And because of his chivalry and fineness, because he would as lief prize open a money-box, or open a letter not addressed to him, as force the emotion upon her that was making his own colour come and go, unsteady his voice, he said no more to her. And soberly, for all he was so secretly thrilled and elated and sure that they understood each other, he agreed that it was getting late, and that their truant holiday was over.

Afterwards they spoke of trivial things, of the boxes that must be packed, and what he would take with him and what leave behind; in whose keeping he would leave the care of dog or ferret. It was not until they were in sight of the house, not until in the distance he saw his mother on the terrace, that he said to her again in that low, unsteady voice:

“ You won’t forget? ”

The strange new shyness with him broke like a flower in her heart into a too poignant sweetness. She shook her head, and that was all. But he took it as the ratification of her promise, following her with his heart lightened.

CHAPTER XI

BLATHWAYT BIRD, whose famous cramming establishment in Notting Hill had been selected for Desmond, was a man with a history. Men, no less than countries and women, are generally better without one, and Blathwayt Bird was no exception to the rule. He had been in Parliament, and might have made a figure there, for he had great debating gifts and that intolerance of other people's opinions and feelings which distinguish proletarian leaders of men. At the commencement of what promised to be an interesting career, however, a slight accident combined with some hereditary delicacy to make a lifelong cripple of him. Henceforth the heated brain effervesced in a shrunken and impotent body. Some spinal trouble developed, and he never recovered the use of his legs.

Unable to debate, he was still able to instruct. His first pupil was the son of one of the Liberal Whips. The boy had been a conspicuous failure at his public school, but after six months with Blathwayt Bird he passed a brilliant examination for the Indian Civil Service. The next was the son of a South African millionaire, and the result was the same. Blathwayt Bird's reputation as a coach sprang, mushroom-like, in a single night. Before he had learned to accommodate himself to his invalid chair, he had more work than he could get through. As a teacher he proved himself truculent, effective, arresting. He took a house in Notting Hill, and people rushed to secure his services for their sons. His pupils headed the lists for Sandhurst, Woolwich, the Indian and Home Civil Services. He enlarged and enlarged his premises, increased his staff, was both conscious and vain of his success, but never became reconciled to his condition.

Wheeled into the dining-room, where he had meals with his pupils and fellow-teachers, he talked Atheism and depravity, giving classical examples in praise, not only of drunkenness, but debauchery. He set the tone of his house,

defending himself when attacked, and repudiating responsibility callously and cynically.

"I am here to pass men through examinations, not to dry-nurse them. If they want dry-nursing they must go to a mealy-mouthed parson. I'm an immoralist, a free thinker. Damn it, look at me! Am I an object lesson on the goodness of God?" he shouted.

The unwieldy establishment—three houses and a disorganised control—was dominated by the personality of the head, and from the first Desmond found it difficult to accommodate himself to its ways.

Blathwayt Bird was a Radical, a Socialist, a Home Ruler, everything to which the young landowner's sympathies were most diametrically opposed. For Desmond was a landowner, although those acres of his paid little or no rent, and what money was allowed to filter through to him was absorbed by payments to the mortgages. He never understood that the wild and heated talk here was half artificial, and only the work was real. Desmond at first tried to argue, and so came under the scathing satire of the cripple's coarse tongue. An injudicious letter from his mother failed to improve matters. Knowing nothing of Blathwayt Bird save that he was a successful coach, she thought it her duty to write to him about Desmond. Agatha never failed in duty, though her perspective might be awry. She was anxious not to prejudice Mr. Bird against Desmond, and wrote carefully:

"You will find my dear boy somewhat excitable and impulsive. It would be better, perhaps, if you used your influence to persuade him to abstain entirely from wine and spirits. . . ."

Blathwayt read the letter aloud, mockingly, at the dinner table.

"You are to drink milk and water, I understand. I wonder she doesn't send you a bottle. I suppose that's what you've been brought up on, why your brain hasn't developed." What he added made the boy's cheeks redden; there was

nothing Blathwayt minded saying to these young men, no decencies he did not enjoy outraging.

Desmond soon became something of a butt to him, and to show he was not the effeminate fellow his tutor thought him, he did and said things to prove his manhood which only proved the contrary.

All the atmosphere was bad for him. Lady Grindelay came to a faint misgiving about it, but not until it was too late for her to make a change. Mr. Bird wrote as he talked. He ridiculed encouraging Desmond to teetotalism, and said he was pleased to discover in him a dawning palate:

“MY DEAR MADAM,—I can report that your son shows a happier aptitude to distinguish between Chateau Yquem and Veuve Cliquot than he does to differentiate his Greek roots. It would be a pity to discourage the only talent I have observed. . . .”

When, in alarm, she wrote again, hoping that Desmond had not proved intemperate, he replied that if she wished to take him away she could, but, if he remained, it would not be as a Sunday school scholar.

Andrew McKay saw the correspondence, and tried to explain Blathwayt Bird to Agatha. She did realise the importance of the examination, was made to understand no one but Bird could get the boy through, and reluctantly agreed to write him no more letters, not to interfere with him.

Andrew's house in Campden Hill was open to Desmond, but he did not often take advantage of the hospitalities offered. He could not bear to meet Michael. At Whitsuntide he heard Michael was again at Marley, whilst he was bidden to remain on grinding at Notting Hill. His mother tried to soften the position.

“It will be better for you to remain where you are. Mr. Bird tells me you will need every minute if you are to get through. I will come up and stay near you for a few days if it will make things any better for you.”

He refused the offer. Sometimes now he was conscious

of a growing resentment against his mother and what he was beginning to think of as her "damnable kindness." He was not yet keen on his prospects, and the getting up the various subjects demanded was thoroughly uncongenial. So was the whole life, with its surroundings.

Eunice wrote, too, but her letters said nothing to him. They seemed to be written under constraint; they were full of what she was doing, never of what she was thinking, differing in some vital essential from the letters he had always had from her. He could not know it was her new shyness that cramped them. The remembrance of their wonderful talk in the woods seemed to him at times only a dream.

It never struck him that she, too, had some reflection of this feeling, that the old, unrestrained intercourse was obscured, without, as yet, giving them a new and more perfect intimacy. She seemed farther off from him than she had ever been, inaccessible. Often now he wished he had said more. Yet he never wrote it, for the vein of chivalry in him prevented this. He thought sometimes that everything would be different if he could pass this "beastly examination."

But in the meantime he resented Michael having the opportunities denied to himself, and went rarely to Campden Hill.

Of course he made friends. He had passed through Eton unscathed, but here he could not hold himself aloof, nor live differently from his fellows; not ostentatiously differently. There were few restrictions and little restraint. As long as the work was got through, nothing else mattered. Desmond went with others of the pupils to theatres and music halls, talked with barmaids and promenaders; "saw life," a sordid life, of which he always remained, however, something of an outsider. He did his best to work, although work was so against the grain. Blathwayt Bird called him milk-bred and mealy-mouthed, until he became more reckless and played at being the man of the world, not condemning that which nevertheless he did not copy. He was sometimes persuaded of his own unworthiness, and thought that Eunice might also be, and that she would give him up; he had at these times no

armour to buckle on, no shining armour of love and faith such as is girded upon boys whose young mothers watch and pray by their bedsides. He was defenceless against any temptation that might come.

Michael came to see him on his return from Marley, bringing messages. Desmond misunderstood all the messages Michael brought, resented hearing of Eunice through him, was almost rude, and said he did not want to hear any more. Michael thought Desmond had deteriorated, and held anxious consultation with his father, hoping he was not getting under bad influence. They tried to get him to go more often to Campden Hill, but after he heard that Michael was going with Lady Grindelay and Eunice to Cornwall at midsummer, and from his mother that he was to join Mr. Bird's reading party, Desmond refused to go at all to Campden Hill, putting forward his work as an excuse.

The McKays heard of him at music halls and feared for him. But they need not have feared. There was no coarse fibre in the texture of his mind, and if he had no armour, he had at least an amulet.

He went down to Marley for the August Bank Holiday. This was to be practically his good-bye visit. The foreign travel had fallen through for the moment, and Lady Grindelay was taking Eunice to Cornwall. The McKays would be of the party, whilst Desmond was to suffer the uncongeniality of Blathwayt Bird and his most backward pupils. Then back to Notting Hill until it was time to go up for the examination. After which, if he was fortunate, there would be Sandhurst. If not—well, that he did not care to contemplate.

He was very much disappointed to find that even during those few days he and Eunice were never alone. His mother had arranged that the Campdens should be there, and one or two cadets; she wished to make Desmond in love with his new career. Everything was designed to that end.

Having cut the ground from under his feet with Eunice, she was anxious to compensate him for all of which she had deprived him. Not knowing that its name was Hope, the spring of life and high endeavour, Agatha was satisfied with

all she had done and was doing for her son. She talked to him of his career until he was sick of the word, and praised him because he took no more champagne than the others with his meals.

Eunice had blossomed into some new beauty, whilst he, emerging from that coarse atmosphere at Notting Hill, had perhaps some new reticence. Lady Grindelay noted with satisfaction the manner of the young people toward each other. As a matter of fact, Eunice hardly knew this changed and silent Desmond, who was so abrupt and strange, cool or indifferent. She began to think she had mistaken what he said to her that day in the wood, or that he had changed his mind. She began to feel estranged from him, ashamed of all she had dreamed. It seemed as if the old intimacy was gone, as if they no longer understood each other. And yet, and yet—she was not sure. There were moments when she thought differently, when his eyes met hers in sudden recognition, when she found herself moved to flush and confusion, and some strange flutter of pleasure or poignant pain.

Lady Grindelay filled the time with engagements, entertainments, keeping the house full, arranging that the two young people should be kept apart. It never struck her that secretly, strangely, shyly, the two she wished to keep separate were abetting her in her endeavour. Eunice and Desmond had no talk together at all. He saw her wooed by all the young men about her, and felt himself strangely and inexplicably debarred. Sometimes he wondered if his mother was right about him, if it was true he was unfit for her. The humility of his spirit was the measure of the greatness of his love. The girl had suddenly become mysterious. To him she represented the whole soul of womanhood. He thrilled with her nearness, and was silenced by it. He felt stained by the knowledge he had acquired, her virginal innocence made him ashamed. If only they had been left alone! But Lady Grindelay shepherded them carefully, conscientiously doing what she believed to be her duty to her dead sister's child.

CHAPTER XII

MICHAEL'S wooing was little different in Cornwall from what it had been at Marley.

Eunice was adroit in contriving that they were never alone together, in avoiding sentimentality and substituting exercise. They were staying at the gayest and most-frequented hotel in Newquay; there were tennis and croquet and golf, and at one or the other of them the girl could always be found. She made friends easily, was always in request for this or the other game. She included Michael in her arrangements, but that was all. He was quite satisfied with the progress he was making; knowing nothing of what was behind her anxiety to avoid being alone with him he put it down to natural girlish shyness, and found it wholly charming. They were to be away six weeks altogether. Before three of them were gone, she complained of being bored with the place, of finding everything tedious; she lost interest in games.

He could not know she was wearying for her boy cousin, for the letters that said so little when they came; that she was counting the days to the time when they were to go back to Marley, home-sick in the sunshine for the shadow of Marley Woods, home-sick beside the changing sea and jagged coastline for the grey river and the banks where it lapped among the reeds. She did not avoid Michael; she went with him willingly on this excursion or the other, preferring him to the strangers from the clubs or hotel, hungry for the talk that led sometimes to Desmond. Michael was ready to tell her of Desmond, unlikely to say anything to wound her. If he had fears or misgivings that the boy was not as steady as he should be, and kept bad company in town, Eunice was the last person in the world to whom he would convey it. He was the type of young man, the best type, steady and definite, who thought women should know nothing of the underside of life, should be kept sweet and ignorant in their guarded homes.

There came a day when he knew he could wait no longer. It was the end of August, and his holiday was coming to an

end. That morning, dressing deliberately and carefully in his grey suit and brown tie, he made up his mind that the time had come when she might know he had her aunt's permission to address her, his father's approval. He meant also to tell her he loved her, but in all the years to come he would show her that. He saw her as his wife, the mother of his children; his hand shook a little when he had finished tying the brown bow.

He meant to keep himself well in hand, not to startle her. He was full of tenderness and consideration and certainty, knowing how well he would care for her.

Having made up his mind to speak to-day, Michael would speak, whether the occasion offered or not. The occasion did offer. Lady Grindelay, divining what he had in his mind, sent them out walking together soon after breakfast, saying she had letters to write.

They went along East Pentire toward the Gannell River, Eunice talking as usual, as if there were nothing to differentiate this day from any other.

"Don't you think the sea looks quite different on the English coast from the way it does on the French? We were at Paris Plage last year, and it was so much quieter, better-mannered, as if it had lessons in deportment—French lessons."

When with Michael she always felt she must entertain him and talk her best, although listening was more to her taste.

She had brought bread with her, and now they stood to feed the seagulls. Her undeclared lover expatiated upon the birds' ill-considered habit of circling over refuse. They stood where at low tide the salt river ran almost dry; the harvest was late, and fields of golden corn swayed on either side; the green hedges marked the boundaries. Far in the distance they heard the swell of the Atlantic. Where they stood the birds circled in their hundreds.

"The gulls are trying to teach the Gannell how to play, saying 'Come on, show a little spirit; send up some waves and foam, don't you know you're a part of the sea?'"

"I had not observed that; it had not struck me in that way."

She threw more breadcrumbs to the birds, and they rose and cawed, circling with pathetic, weakly legs hanging down, and swaying wings.

"We never do see things the same way, do we?" she said unreflectingly.

"I should be sorry to think that," he answered gravely. She laughed.

"It isn't surprising. You are older than I am, and you know so much more."

"I am sure you know all that a girl should."

"Do I? I feel very ignorant sometimes. I always hated lessons. Auntie and you know a hundred thousand things more than I do. You and she agree about everything."

Dark and purple was the distant sea, and the sky a wind-swept blue.

"I should be sorry to think we differed on any essential points," he began.

She laughed again, mocking him a little in her quick change of mood.

"How solemn you are to-day! We differ about the gulls, don't we? You think they flock here to feed on impurity, because the drains attract them. I think they are having a party, playing games, hide-and-seek and puss-in-the-corner, dancing."

"You are fanciful about them."

"You are never fanciful, are you?"

"I had hoped you found me companionable."

She was shocked at the hurt tone in his voice, and hastened to reassure him; she would not for anything have been found lacking in courtesy.

"Of course I do. You know that. I was only joking about the seagulls. We have had some nice talks; of course I've found you companionable."

He had determined to speak to her to-day, to-morrow or the next day he must go back to town. He cleared his throat, took the opening and said almost the words he had prepared before he came out, appropriate words.

"I am glad of that—more than glad. You say you have

found me companionable in a short holiday. I hope, on a longer road, you would not find me less congenial." He faltered before the puzzled surprise in her eyes, paused. His stiff and formal words misrepresented his feelings. He really loved her well and truly. She could see some emotion in his face, and wondered at it; then had the quick intuition that the moment she had instinctively avoided was upon her. She flushed quickly, and would have interrupted with light or trivial speech.

"We've been a much longer road than this. We walked to the Mawgan the day before yesterday."

"You will listen to me, won't you?" He was almost humble. "You know what I want to say, although I may be saying it badly."

"Saying it badly!" Poor Michael, who had ever distinguished himself at the Union or lesser debating societies! The very doubt made for grace.

"Your aunt has given me permission to speak to you. My father and sisters would welcome you. Don't turn your head away. Leave off feeding the gulls."

She threw her last crumb and the paper bag to them, and turned at his request. His voice said more than his words, and it was his voice she answered impulsively, her cheeks flushed.

"Don't say any more, please; don't say any more, Michael."

"I must."

"But I don't want to hear."

"You know I am asking you to marry me—not at once, not until you are ready. But to say one day you will be my wife."

"Oh, no, no! It's impossible!" Never had she looked fairer, nor her flushed face sweeter. "I am so sorry, Michael, more than sorry. Why did you say it? You know I don't want to marry you. I can't."

"The idea is new to you, strange."

"No, it isn't." The flush deepened. "I knew you were going to ask me. I wanted to prevent you."

"Why?" He was really a bad wooer. "You haven't anything against me, have you? I can't take 'no' for an answer, I really can't. I have had this in my mind so long. You say you've known it."

"I tried not to—not to believe it."

"But now that you know it is true." He burst into truth, or what he thought was truth. "I love you. I can't live without you."

Now he pleaded, pleaded as well as he knew; she could not silence him, although she tried. She resented the circumstance, resented with a new and sudden irritability that he was here at all, telling her that he loved her. What had lain warm and quiescent all these months in her girlish heart was again like an expanding flower. Her colour came and went, her breath was uneven, but not for Michael or his pleading.

"Your aunt and my father are old friends. In every way it would be suitable."

"Don't talk about it, please don't talk about it any more, Michael. I don't mean to marry, at least not for years and years. I don't want to leave auntie." Any excuse must serve. "Do leave off talking about it."

"But if she agrees, if she herself tells you it is her wish?"

"Nothing could make any difference." They stood side by side in silence for a moment or two. Then he broke out in phrase less stilted than he had used up to now, more natural altogether.

"Give me any reason—any real reason. You must leave home one day. Marley will belong to Desmond. There isn't anyone you like better than me, is there? I'm going home to-morrow; I can't go away and feel you have decided against me. You can't have decided against me. Speak freely, we have been good companions, the only differences between us are the differences between any man and girl. You are more imaginative, poetic." He was becoming desperate. "I know I'm more matter-of-fact; I'll try and alter."

"It isn't that."

"What is it, then? I have never looked at another girl; you are the uttermost perfection to me, the sweetest. . . ."

His voice went, but came back. "Don't think I don't know I'm unworthy. Any man is unworthy of such a girl as you."

"I wish you wouldn't say such things."

"I must. I don't think you understand. I must make you know what this means to me. For over a year now I've thought of little else. Don't send me away, you don't dislike me, do you? You said you found me companionable."

"That isn't enough!"

Her eyes were averted from him, she was looking across the sea to the horizon where the sun illumined the dark waters, and there were visions, vistas.

"It isn't enough, Michael! It isn't enough!" she repeated, and now there was something wistful in her eyes, passionate in her speech.

"What more is it you want?" And his words, too, were passionate. "I love you with my whole heart."

"But I don't love you," she answered. "I can't help it. I know how good you are, and kind, but love—love is different." She knew so well, young as she was, she knew. "Don't look like that, Michael. What can I do? Love and liking are so different."

Mystery and enchantment were in the words he said: "*I love you with my whole heart.*" But as she listened and felt the thrill of them, it was not Michael who was saying them. She heard another's voice. Her eyes grew soft and filled, her heart remembered and beat quickly. None of the gladness and glow was for Michael, though he went on telling her how greatly he cared for her. She was hardly listening, she was vaguely sorry for him, but hardly listening. Her heart was awake, clamouring, although as yet she hardly knew for what.

"Won't you give me some hope? When you are older—next year, perhaps? I know how young you are, I am quite content to wait."

It was so unlike Michael to plead; his pleading seemed to deprive him of dignity. She was sorry for him and for his lost dignity.

"I couldn't feel any different if you waited a hundred years; really, I couldn't."

"You are not kind!" He felt more than he could express, but her quickened sympathy heard the falter in his voice.

"I don't mean to be unkind. Oh, Michael, forgive me; don't be angry with me! I could never marry you. I can't even bear to think of your wanting me to. Don't you see, don't you understand? I don't mean ever to marry, but if I did it would be because, because" (the colours in her cheeks and eyes were beautiful and changing, reflections of the sea and sky) "because I cared for someone so much that—that I never wanted to be away from him."

"You can't imagine yourself feeling like that with me?"

But he knew the answer before it came to him, low-voiced. There was nothing more to be said. They stood where they were a little while, still watching the gulls. Michael felt cold, and spoke of the change in the weather:

"One can never rely upon the temperature at this time of year."

"It's time we turned back, nearly lunch time, isn't it?"

The matter was ended; they talked of other things persistently until they reached the hotel. Michael was striving to recapture that lost dignity of his. His pride was wounded, but he wished and struggled to hide his wounded heart. To be a rejected suitor was hard to bear, he, with all his gifts. But to be what he was—a rejected lover—hurt him a thousand times more. She did not need his love, would have none of it.

The alteration that knowledge made in Michael McKay was not a thing that showed at once; it might have left him drier, drained him of feeling. Instead it flowed inward, deepening and enlarging him.

To face Lady Grindelay with the story of his defeat was difficult, and he winced under her sympathy. When she told him that Eunice was too young to know her own mind he shook his head. He knew better. She was looking to life not only for love, but romance. Something beneath his dry surface thrilled and taught him.

His had been no figure of romance for her. He began to see that was so, wishing that no one else need know. All his need now was to hurry back to the office, and bury his pain and discomfiture in legal tomes and papers—to hide himself.

Lady Grindelay was full of sympathy for him; her own disappointment counted less than his, for she at least was still able to hope. Just as Michael looked now, Andrew had looked over thirty years ago, surprising her, for he, too, had a cold manner and Scottish caution. But Eunice would be guarded from such an error as she had made in rejecting Andrew and marrying Lord Grindelay.

“It will come right, Michael. Give her time, leave me to talk to her about you. See how different she will feel after I have talked to her.”

But Michael packed for London that night; he did not wish to see either of them again for a time.

As for Eunice, she was glad when Michael was gone. She did not want to speak of what had happened. It seemed such foolish talk. She and Michael! She remembered Desmond had warned her, and the promise that had been so unnecessary. She thought how young and foolish she had been a few months ago, and blushed in remembering what else Desmond had said to her when they were under the trees at Marley. It had been hibernating in her heart all that summer, and could never sleep again.

Lady Grindelay waited, and in the end forced her confidence. Eunice did not want to speak, was not ready for speech. And the confidence that was forced was only a half confidence; her speech closed down again like the leaves of a night flower forced open by some rude hand before the darkness comes.

“Poor Michael! His holiday was cut sadly short. You were not very kind to him, I fear.”

“He was silly.”

“I told him you were still young, you might change your mind.”

"I couldn't marry Michael," Eunice said hurriedly, shamefacedly. "I could never marry Michael."

"Why not?"

"It's impossible!" She did not want to explain.

Lady Grindelay spoke of Michael's high character, fine qualities. Eunice grew hot in saying that had nothing to do with it. She was sure Michael was all that her aunt said. Agatha wanted to get into the girl's mind and guide it. She was a little jarred and repelled by what she was being told.

"Congenial tastes, characteristics, sympathies are what make a happy marriage."

"But there is something else. . . ."

"Tell me what is in your mind against this marriage. To have won Michael's regard, his great regard, is something of which to be proud. Are you not proud of it? You are little more than a child. Michael is a good man."

"I want to stay with you," there was quite a pause, and when she added two words her voice was low, "with you and Desmond."

"With you and Desmond!"

Lady Grindelay could have won the confidence she would have forced. She had but to yield her prejudices, open her eyes to what was before her, and open them wide and tolerantly. One word now, and all the unhappy future could have been averted. What her son had told her the girl at her knee was repeating. She need do nothing, only stand aside, let them take their own lives in their own hands—follow nature.

But she deemed her conscience and her duty were involved. "Intolerant Agatha" her husband had often called her. She had not grown less so as the years rolled on, confirming her in place and power. "With you and Desmond," the girl whispered.

Why not? What could have been better? The girl for whom she had made herself responsible to stay for ever in the home she loved with the son who should inherit it! But she had decided that Eunice should marry Michael. She owed his father that, and to Monica's child safeguarding from

danger. Love was almost a myth to her—sex love. Desmond was too young to know his own mind. Her husband had told her how often he had been in love.

“I don’t suppose Desmond will come back to Marley for any length of time, at least. You can stay on with me, of course, always, if you don’t wish to marry. But Desmond will, I hope, be with his regiment.”

The low voice persisted. The girl had been forced into speaking, and now she could not be silent.

“But when he is older? When he comes home for good?”

Eunice could not say all there was in her mind. She was too shy, and he had given her no title to speak. At Whitsuntide he had been quite different. But she never faltered in her allegiance to Desmond. She began to speak again presently, hurriedly, to defend, to explain him.

Agatha said, a little coldly, that there was no doubt Eunice thought she knew Desmond better than his own mother did, and had a spasm of pain lest it might be true.

But Eunice’s love was young and tender and defenceless; she could not even talk about it. He had given her no title; he had said nothing at Whitsuntide. Agatha went on, half hurt, and half because she knew no better.

“Give up any idea of Desmond, be guided by me, you may be sure I have only your interest at heart. You must let me judge for you.”

There may have been jealousy in it, a natural jealousy; but if so, she was unaware of it. She thought only that it would be years, if ever, before Desmond would be fit for responsibility, and that it was she who would guide him all these years. Eunice must marry Michael because the promise had been given to Andrew. But she did not wish the girl to be unhappy or feel ill-used, meant to be kind to her. She thought Eunice would be easy to persuade, it was Eunice herself who gave her that impression.

Whatever the girl’s feelings were toward her cousin at this time they were immature feelings, young and tender, ignorant, half-ashamed. She could not argue with her aunt, nor express herself clearly.

CHAPTER XIII

WHILST Michael was conducting his ill-fated wooing in Cornwall, Desmond was spending his monotonous six weeks at Bognor.

Anyone who knows anything about reading parties knows that they are not exhilarating. Blathwayt Bird managed to get a certain amount of work done, but he was suffering from one of his recurrent attacks of ill-health, and left his five or six young men very much to their own devices. Pretty poor devices they were: ogling young ladies on the sands; going aimless walks; playing nap; taking part in a weekly cricket match where the local clergyman umpired, and looked after his local team so well that the stumps had to fly before the batsman retired. Everyone was glad to go back to town, Desmond no less than the others.

In London he had a hurried glimpse of his mother and Eunice. They stayed in London one night on their way from Cornwall. They were not returning to Marley, but going to Biarritz for the month of September and part of October.

"You'll have passed by the time we get back."

"Anyway, the beastly examination will be over."

He dined with them at their hotel, and saw them off from Victoria the next day. He had nothing to say to Eunice, apparently, nor she to him. If they had, there was no opportunity. Lady Grindelay talked of Cornish scenery, and of the new travelling maid she had secured—a treasure who spoke several languages, and could be trusted to see them through the various custom-houses. She lamented that Eunice spoke no Spanish, and hoped her French would prove useful. She gave Desmond a handsome cheque and told him he was not to grudge himself anything, suggested he should buy a horse, and ride in the Park in the mornings.

"We shall be back before you go to Sandhurst. You must keep yourself well."

She seemed to have no doubt he would get through. Affairs in South Africa were farther than ever from a settlement.

Desmond did manage to ask Eunice if McKay had been in Cornwall all the time they were there; and, of course, interpreted the blush and hesitation of the affirmative reply. He thought she had forgotten all they had said to each other in the wood. She thought he had. But neither of them was quite sure. He asked his mother if Michael McKay was to be at Biarritz, and she replied without reflection:

“Very probably.”

But this was after she had taken her seat in the railway carriage, and was testing the value of her new treasure, who had actually given her a cushion for her back, the tea-basket as a footstool, and was inquiring if she would like a book or a paper.

When he walked out of the station Desmond had the idea that if he failed to pass he would not face them; he would either enlist or cut his throat. He had the feeling his mother was standing successfully between him and Eunice, that he was as much under her sway as the servants at Marley Court, the villagers at Little Marley. He owed her even his income. Languedoc was only an expense. He hated his dependence.

Very soon, too, he heard how well Biarritz suited them all, and that they were going on to San Sebastian when the weather grew cooler.

His own letters were short. He said he was busy working, and for a short time after their departure this was true. Even Blathwayt Bird was heard to say young Grindelay was waking up; if he could catch the examiners napping, he might get through, that is, if he could keep it up. But he doubted that, and the doubt was not helpful to Desmond. Neither was the weather, it was very damp and muggy, raining continuously, affecting his spirits. It should have been a time of growth with the boy, but all the growth was blocked and stifled.

Two weeks before the examination he caught cold. When the cold was pronounced influenza, he was glad of the excuse

it gave him to remain in bed. Blathwayt would "rot him" about staying in bed for a cold, however badly his head ached, or his limbs, but an attack of influenza justified him. Besides, the doctor insisted, and he had neither the power nor the inclination to resist.

There was no one in the house whose duty it was to attend to Desmond. Blathwayt Bird never thought anyone could be ill but himself, or that it mattered if anyone else should be. Influenza was a trivial complaint, almost childish, an affair of forty-eight hours. Nevertheless, in accordance with his duty, he wrote to Lady Grindelay, making light of the attack.

"He will be all right in a day or two, no doubt; in any case, I think we are through the worst." He was alluding to the coaching and not to the illness. "I think he will get through, although it has been a hard fight; he has shown himself much more industrious lately."

Desmond, on the third or fourth day of his illness, asked if his mother had been written to. The doctor was able to assure him this had been done. It was after the symptoms of pneumonia developed that he got a letter from her. It urged him to make a last effort.

"Mr. Bird writes me that the next fortnight is all-important. I hope you have thrown off your chill and are working with all your power."

"Wire her I'm all right," he said feebly to the nurse, only installed a couple of hours. "Tell her I won't write again until after the examination. I can't have her bothering me now."

The nurse soothed him, thought already it was important he should not be bothered, wrote out the telegram according to his wish, signed it with his name:

"Getting on all right. Writing later.—DESMOND."

It seemed inadequate, but he was unable to think of anything better to say. He was running into illness—serious illness, and already his mind was a little obscured.

Under the circumstances, Mr. Bird wrote again toward

the end of the week. But he still did not believe that young Lord Grindelay was really ill. He thought the doctor was probably desirous of running up an account.

"Influenza is rife in London at the moment. Desmond has had a sharp attack, apparently, but when this reaches you he should be well on the road to recovery."

She telegraphed when she got this letter, and also to Marley, directing that hothouse grapes and other fruit should be sent to Lord Grindelay. By this time Nurse Radlett had listened to the young Irish peer in delirium, when his mind was wandering. It may be supposed that she had formed her plan, or some plan. Already she knew she wanted no one to come between her and her patient. Again she sent a reassuring telegram. And Agatha *was* reassured, taking it for granted Desmond was back at work; the test time was imminent.

Nurse Radlett informed herself that Desmond, Lord Grindelay, was an only son, and that the Languedoc acres were many; as to their condition or value, she made no inquiries, taking them on trust. She had the young man entirely to herself, to nurse or influence. The institution hummed with industry as the final days approached, rustled with papers and the loud voice of Blathwayt Bird. No one had time to think of the doubtful pupil, who might have got a place, though only a low one, reflecting no credit on the establishment. He was important to no one in Notting Hill but Nurse Radlett; to her he was of ever-growing interest as the days went on.

Desmond's temperature went up and up, and in low muttered delirium Nurse Radlett heard of Eunice and Michael, of his mother's bad opinion of him, and his own self-doubt. Desmond, usually so reticent and reserved, in his delirium let that ultra-intelligent nurse into many of the secret places of his wounded sensitiveness.

Nurse Radlett, red-haired, and attractive in her white cap and apron and neat uniform, thoroughly capable and certificated, sat up with Desmond at night and tended him by day, proving herself not only competent but indefatigable in

attention, unwearingly kind. She could hardly be persuaded to her daily walk, and came back bringing a bunch of violets, or a newspaper, oranges that suited him better than the Marley grapes, stories to beguile the weary hours. She relieved his pains with poultices and steam kettle, his sleeplessness with drugs, his weakness and depression with many nursing expedients. He had had no illness before this, except infantile ones under Biddy's care. Nurse Radlett was much more competent than Biddy, as he remembered her nursing. Desmond was really very ill for a short time, was nearer to danger, and even to death, than anybody but the nurse and doctor ever knew. Desmond himself knew it only when the danger was past. Then he heard that no one had inquired for him, that no one had been interested in what became of him. No one but Nurse Radlett! It was already September when he was well enough to realise this. There was no question now of his being well enough to go up for his examination. But Blathwayt Bird was so busy putting the final polish on those boys who were sure to do him credit, and keep up his average, that he even forgot to write to Lady Grindelay. She took it for granted Desmond was up at Sandhurst plodding through his papers.

Nurse Radlett, quite aware of what was in her patient's mind, why he inquired for letters so constantly and was depressed and cast down by their absence, asked him one day carelessly if Miss Eunice Fellowes was not a cousin of his; told him, as if she knew no better than that it was good news, that she had just read the announcement of her engagement to a Mr. McKay.

"I should have thought your mother would have looked higher for her. He doesn't seem to have a country place at all. It only gives a London address—Campden Hill—it doesn't seem he is anyone in particular."

Desmond, laid very low by the influenza and subsequent pneumonia, never asked her in what paper she had seen the announcement, never asked to look at it or for confirmation of the news. She had reckoned on this. He went very pale when she gave him the news, and she took the pillow from

under his head, made him lie flat, and talked about the heat of the room.

He never doubted the story, never dreamed his good, kind, attentive nurse could so deceive him. He had been very ill, and nobody had written or inquired for him. Much that happened in those worst days of his illness was always confused in his mind. He only remembered the chill sense of desolation that fell upon him then, heralding a sharp relapse.

Afterwards he knew Nurse Radlett was always there, soft-handed and gentle. One day he saw that she was crying, and lay wondering feebly as to the cause of her tears. He asked if he was going to die. She hesitated before saying "No," came over to the bed, and put a hand on his pulse. He could see her eyes were moist.

"I can't bear to see you so weak."

Desmond had no idea how weak he was until she told him of it.

She made the pillows more comfortable, lifting him so that his head lay against her breast a moment.

"You are not to worry about what I was crying for. Who told you I was crying?"

"I saw you. Am I going to die? Tell me the truth. I don't care. Nobody cares."

Every day he asked, and every day he was told nobody had inquired after him—that there were no letters from Biarritz.

"I'm not going to let you die if I can keep you here."

"I am very bad, then?"

"You must not talk." A cool, soft hand was laid upon his hot forehead and over his fevered eyes. "I am going to pull you through if I have to watch day and night. You won't die for want of care."

He lay and thought what would happen if he were to die. It seemed an easy way out of his troubles. He would never pass any examinations, he could not retain names or dates in his woolly head; he was no good. He felt very tired, and it seemed that nothing mattered. But Nurse Radlett let him see, never ceased to let him see, that to her at any rate he was

all-important. They were alone together all the time save for the visits of the doctor and short ones from one or another of the boys or over-worked teaching staff. The house emptied suddenly, and now everyone was at Woolwich or Sandhurst, Oxford or Cambridge, or Burlington House. Nurse Radlett had no one to interfere with her. Desmond for the moment was without spring or initiative, his vitality low. His treatment had been old-fashioned. He had been given too many drugs, too little air and food and moral stimulant. It suited neither nurse nor doctor that he should get well too quickly. They were not in league, but their interests were identical.

"Tell me about your troubles; I am so sick of lying here thinking of my own." This was a few days after he had watched her crying and inquired, stupidly enough, whether it was because he was going to die. His mind was clearer now; he knew what an absurd hypothesis that had been.

"I've seen you crying more than once. Is anybody you care about ill? I've been awfully ill, haven't I? Neither my mother nor cousin has written or sent. Is someone ill belonging to you? Tell me about it."

"You know nobody could have been worse than you were—nobody who has ever got better."

"It wasn't about me you were crying that night. Who were you crying about?"

"Why shouldn't it have been about you?"

She was standing by the side of his bed. There had been nights, or hours, when he could not bear that she should stand anywhere else, when she had been his only hold in a world that swayed deliriously about him, with voids into which he sank, sick darknesses when the cold sweat broke out upon his forehead, and he swung breathless over fathomless pits. He only felt safety when he found her wiping the sweat from his forehead, when he found himself clutching her dress or apron.

"Why shouldn't I have been crying about you?"

"Were you?"

It seemed wonderful. No one else cared. He could still hardly move in bed. She stooped even now and raised him

in her strong, helpful arms, pillowing his head more comfortably.

"Don't you think one can get fond of a patient?"

"Not of one like me."

"Why not of one like you?"

"I'm not much of a fellow."

"You haven't had a good time?"

"Rotten." He spoke shortly.

"Poor boy!" She answered briefly, but there was a world of sympathy in her voice. "I knew you were unhappy," she said under her breath, as if she were guessing and sorry to have guessed right.

"Did you ever see anyone as lonely in a bad illness as I've been?" His voice choked; he turned his head away from her and hid it in the pillow. On the pretence of moving him into a more comfortable position, she rested his head on to her breast.

That night, when she lay on the sofa in his room in her blue dressing-gown, her red hair unbound—an aureole, as it were, about her—she began to talk about loneliness; she said she could understand so well what he was going through, having suffered herself.

He was restless that night and could not sleep. The night-light burned low, and the fire, too. They were intimately and extraordinarily alone in the stillness of the night. Nurse Radlett began to tell him the story of her life. He listened; he could not sleep, and anything was better than going over and over again the reasons that had led Eunice to leave off writing to him, to engage herself to Michael McKay. Of course, she would never marry Michael; he had her promise. She had engaged herself to him to please his mother, who had persuaded her to it. It would be all right if he passed his examination; not that he would ever pass. Better than such thoughts as these, coming and going, keeping him from sleep, making him turn over and then back again in his hot and restless bed, was Nurse Radlett's talk. She seemed to have had a rotten time too. He began to listen, even to be

interested. Anything was better than lying here thinking of Eunice and Michael.

There were many nights before he heard the worst thing that had befallen his good nurse. By the time he learnt this he was already overwhelmingly sorry for her. He could not read, he was sick of his thoughts, the days were longer than the nights. He missed her when she was out of the room, when she went for her daily walk or rest; there was nothing to do when she was not there. She offered never to go out, said she wanted no rest. He began to realise that she had grown fond of him, to be glad about it—grateful. She kept him partially drugged, having the doctor's authority for this, since these restless, wakeful nights, as she described them, were retarding his recovery. So she said, and the doctor thought it more than likely. Veronal, chloral, the various bromides were tried. Desmond's brain did not gain in lucidity under the treatment.

"You are lucky in having such a devoted nurse," the doctor told him.

"I know I am," he answered gratefully, weakly, indefinitely moved.

He knew it. She stopped awake at nights to talk to him and hardly left him in the day. He owed his life to her; his own people had not cared. Talking of her troubles because he begged her to, saying it took his mind off his own, she began to tell him something of the perils to which young girls were exposed when they were trying to earn a living for themselves, told him of temptations, enlarged upon them, stirred his quickening sympathy, his imagination.

The warm room, lit by the night-light and the low fire, became full of man's unbridled passions, woman's defencelessness. She talked from the distance of the sofa at the foot of the bed, but the time came when she had to give him food or medicine, when she went over to his side, sat there, and after she had taken glass or cup away, went on talking. In her blue dressing-gown, with hair unbound, she looked like a girl—one of those girls of whom she had been talking.

"What would you think of me, what would you say of

me, if—if——?” Her head went down on the quilt, and he heard her asking him what he would think of her if she had been like one of those girls, had been tempted, fallen. He caught the sob as if it were in his own throat, put a weak hand on her soft hair; only to comfort her, only to tell her he would think no worse of her, to remind her of what she had been to him, of his gratitude that nothing could ever alter.

“I was too young to protect myself.”

Then he heard from her of temperament, of what girls suffered; it was new talk to him. She made him go red in the dusk.

One night was like another, only her talk became less and less restrained. He discovered in himself the restlessness of which she spoke, turning the current of his thoughts by the things she told him. He left off thinking of Eunice, purposely left off. She was not for such talk as this, nor for such restlessness. He began to understand better what Gabrielle meant by “temperament” and “suffering.” She asked him to call her Gabrielle. There seemed no harm in letting her lie beside him as she talked, her red hair fragrant and soft against her face. She made no secret of having got to care for him, she played her part with adroitness, subtlety, and a knowledge of men not gained in one adventure, but in many. Yet to stir his blood was difficult. To move his pity, his young chivalry, was easier; and it was on that she concentrated presently. The time came when he told her he would never be like other men, never take advantage of her defencelessness.

CHAPTER XIV

DESMOND was nursed into convalescence by Nurse Gabrielle Radlett. She went with him to Torquay when the doctor agreed with her that change of air was necessary for the patient.

Yet, when during that October, war was declared, and Lady Grindelay and Eunice came hurrying back from Biarritz, nothing had happened that was irrevocable. Eunice was not engaged to Michael, had not even seen him since they parted by the Gannell River, nor was Desmond so entangled with Gabrielle that he could not have freed himself when he knew it. His mother's hands were to rivet the chains upon him—her nervous, bungling hands.

Desmond was not at the station to welcome them, nor at the furnished house Lady Grindelay had rented for the winter. In some anxiety the day after her return Lady Grindelay drove up to Notting Hill. And there she heard with astonishment, which rapidly gave way to indignation, of how much more serious Desmond's illness had been than she knew, and that he had been sent to the seaside with a nurse by the doctor's orders. Blathwayt Bird was callous to her indignation. He was satisfied the boy had not the opportunity of failure. Another coaching genius had appeared on the horizon, and the two of them were racing for averages.

Lady Grindelay was the very type that aggravated Blathwayt Bird's socialism into extravagance and unreason. Not only did she bear about her an indefinable air of birth and good breeding, but she had the absurdity of a title, and the reputation and appearance of wealth. He thought her manner patronising, and now she had the impertinence to upbraid him.

"I understood from you my son's illness was only slight, that he had recovered two weeks ago," Lady Grindelay ex-

claimed when she was told Desmond was not there, but in Torquay with a nurse.

"Did I tell you so? Well, I didn't think it of much importance," Blathwayt answered calmly. He had been wheeled into the room in his invalid chair, and pretended at first to have forgotten what had become of young Lord Grindelay, and whether he was in the house or not. "See what the young rip is doing," he said to his secretary. "Oh, I remember now!"

He behaved outrageously, as was his wont when the humour seized him. When his interlocutor expressed her indignation his behaviour became worse, for he suggested that Desmond had prolonged and exaggerated his illness to avoid his work. And he added, with something of a chuckle, that there might be more in it than met the eye.

"He's got a pretty, red-haired nurse, the young rascal, and they've gone off to Torquay together. I shouldn't send after him if I were you; I should wait until he came back. He's not the first lad to cut loose from his mother's apron-strings."

Agatha could not even wait to hear more. She was worse than angry at thinking she had placed Desmond in such hands.

Dr. Ashford put a different complexion on the matter, and showed a series of temperature charts. He said he understood that Lady Grindelay had been kept informed, although on one occasion he had suggested a telegram being sent to her.

"One lung has still a little delicacy, a little dullness. Certainly, I advised he should go to the sea. As for the nurse, she is a most able young woman. He was quite unfit to be alone."

She telegraphed immediately to Desmond at Torquay, announcing their return, and that she was ready to come to him. He replied that he was completely recovered, and would prefer to join them in London.

When, after further delay, he came, she found him grown and very thin. He was impatient, and even a little irritable

when questioned about his health, and with difficulty she persuaded him to allow his lungs to be examined.

"There is nothing the matter with me," he said. And, indeed, the eminent specialist she consulted could find little to justify Lady Grindelay's anxiety. He said Desmond had perhaps overgrown his strength.

"We never thought he was going to be so tall, did we?" Eunice said when she heard the favourable report.

"Desmond is going to more than justify all our hopes," Lady Grindelay answered, trying to chase the gloom from his face.

"Like getting into the Army," he scoffed. For now that war was declared he hated himself for being outside.

Desmond, just now, was suffering from a horrible sense of unworthiness. He knew that Eunice was not engaged to Michael. But he could scarcely bear to look at or speak to her. Gabrielle Radlett was between them; what in him had been plastic to her moulding was something with which Eunice must not be soiled. His unhappiness at the position was perhaps excessive. For it was not too late to extricate himself, in this first week of his mother's and Eunice's homecoming. He realised this presently, and made a desperate attempt to avert the doom that was settling over him. But it was like the forlorn hope he was to lead later, and to meet with no better result. Only here his mother was his enemy, a friendly and diplomatic foe, most difficult to fight.

Desmond seemed rather to avoid Eunice than otherwise. His mother could scarcely bear him out of her sight. She was desperately concerned about his health, and when the doctors had reassured her, yet more desperately concerned about his happiness. She became convinced that it was his failure to pass into the Army that was on his mind, and decided that something must be done in the matter. She came to that conclusion one night, when, on the advice of an old lady who ought to have known better, she took the two young people to the Palace music-hall, to convince themselves of the patriotic feeling that the declaration of war had aroused.

It may have been true that the music-halls were full of

this note of patriotism. But it was music-hall patriotism—vulgar, blatant, without endeavour or personal sacrifice. A little dwarf, with misshapen limbs and deformed fingers, who was a great favourite with this particular public, was dressed in uniform and paraded the stage singing a lyric entitled “A little British Army goes a damned long way,” telling an overwhelmingly enthusiastic audience that one British soldier could “down” ten foreigners of any nationality. There were comic lines in the song about “Dutch courage.” A portrait of Kruger drinking coffee was thrown on the screen and duly hissed. This was followed by one of Sir George White that was duly applauded.

Eunice said to Desmond as they drove home:

“I felt very excited when they unfurled our flag. You did, too, didn’t you, Desmond? I saw you get red.”

“I wish to God I was out there,” answered Desmond gloomily.

And that decided Agatha to call on the Metherbys. It has to be remembered that at that time few had any idea save that the war would be a small affair, short-lived. Among Lady Grindelay’s friends the impression prevailed that the youngsters who got out in time to see something of the fun would be lucky; it would be little more than a picnic. All the young men in their own particular sets were keen on going, and all their relatives were proud of their high courage and handsome uniforms. There were no misgivings.

Lady Grindelay came home to lunch a few days after the visit to the music-hall in great good humour. She had found there were ways and means of giving Desmond his heart’s desire, or what she thought was her heart’s desire. Through Colonel Metherby’s influence at the War Office she had accomplished her object. Desmond was to have a commission as second lieutenant in the militia battalion of Colonel Metherby’s regiment. If the war went on, he would be attached, and subsequently transferred, to the regular battalion. He might even go out to South Africa . . . She had the tribute of Desmond’s startled attention, Eunice’s exclamation.

"Even in these degenerate days there is something to be done by friendship."

Lady Grindelay meant patronage, but said friendship. She was elated at her success, there was to be no delay. She neglected her luncheon whilst she talked, sending away the truffled eggs and lobster salad in the excitement of her news. Colonel Metherby or his wife had posted her, and she was full of detail.

"There is any amount to do. You can go to the Army tailor's this afternoon."

She produced a list of the tradesmen he was to patronise, of the regimental tailors, saddle-makers and others. She took the paper out of her purse and passed it to him before she tasted the *marango de veau*.

"No claret, thank you. Pass this to his lordship."

After lunch she asked Desmond to go up with her to the study. Perhaps she looked forward to hearing him express his gratitude, to hear him say how wonderfully she had found out what ailed him, and so quickly relieved it. He was to pass into his chosen profession without examination. She never noticed the irresolution with which he followed her, but was disappointed when the expressions of gratitude and surprise failed to come from him. He still looked unhappy. She had the intensest desire to solace him, to make him know that was her desire.

"You will be pushed on as quickly as possible. Mrs. Metherby and I are old friends, and Colonel Metherby has great influence at the War Office. There is no doubt of your commission."

He tried then to make the response expected of him. He saw the kindness of her intention.

"It's awfully good of you to have taken so much trouble."

"I don't want any thanks."

She was hurt by his manner and the way he was taking her news, and went on shortly:

"Let us make a list of what there is to do. Get a pencil.

There is paper in that drawer. You might go to Sandro's this afternoon to be measured."

Now she was at her writing-table, her pencil suspended over the paper.

"Shall I have to go away at once?"

"To Hythe or Aldershot. Yes, I think almost immediately. Why?" She looked inquiringly, surprised—looked up to find his blue eyes misty and miserable and his lips a little tremulous.

"You haven't changed your mind about what we spoke of before?" he said desperately.

She put down her pencil and looked at him inquiringly.

"What was that?"

He flushed furiously.

"About Eunice. If it hadn't been for what you said——"

But he did not finish the sentence. He was going through a bad time at the hands of a clever, unscrupulous woman. Sometimes he was sorry for Gabrielle Radlett; sometimes he hated her, and always himself for his weakness. Sin had little attraction for young Lord Grindelay; there was more of his mother than his father in him. Already what he had done was hot coal in his breast. And yet it was not irretrievable.

"What I said?"

She had really half forgotten; the boy-and-girl love between him and Eunice was so much less than her own feeling for him that it had ceased to seem of importance. But now that she remembered she was only anxious not to estrange him. "I hope I was not harsh or inconsiderate; I was thinking for both of you."

"I know as well as you do I am not good enough for her."

"Perhaps by now you have learned self-control," she began hesitatingly.

"No, I haven't, I'm not a bit better than I was; I'm worse."

"You wrong yourself. I'm sure you wrong yourself."

"Don't you believe it?"

She wanted to tell him she too had had periods of self-distrust, to draw him closer to her by her confession; she wanted his confidence; and then, suddenly, she dreaded it.

"I—I'm in a ghastly mess."

"Not—not what that horrible man hinted?"

The blood rushed into her face; she conjured up a dreadful thing.

"You don't mean Bird guessed!" Desmond was startled into answering. "What did he tell you?"

"That your nurse—that you and your nurse——" She could not go on.

"Cockieolly told you that!"

"Is that what you called him?" she said mechanically.

"Cockieolly Bird. Yes. I wonder how he knew?"

"It is true, then?" she gasped.

"It depends what he said."

He was longing for the relief of confession. His mother was old, experienced, he even thought at the moment she was a woman of the world. He needed advice, help.

"I suppose it's what you would call true?" he said sullenly; but only the manner was sullen, hiding anxiety, even hope.

"But . . . but you care for Eunice," she said with difficulty.

"What's that got to do with it?"

She had no answer ready, and he went on:

"There is nothing to prevent my marrying Eunice, if you will give your consent."

"How can I? How can I?"

Lord Grindelay's stories came rushing into her mind, all of them at once. Seduction and intrigue, licentiousness and intemperance; all the dreadful things men do.

"You took advantage of her position!"

He could not see into her mind, nor that she pictured Nurse Radlett as his victim, caught unawares whilst tending him. She saw dreadful pictures.

And but a few hours ago, divining his ambition, she had counted herself happy. He was England's soldier and her

son. She was sending him forth, as so many Wanstead mothers had done. Now he was hardly fit to go. He saw how her face had changed, the grey disappointment in it.

"You may say anything you like to me. I suppose you think I'm outside the pale, that this makes it more impossible than ever. But if I had been engaged to Eunice it couldn't have happened."

"You ought to have thought of her." She did not know what to say.

"I'm no worse than other fellows."

"God help their mothers and wives," she whispered.

"That's rot."

For all his unhappiness he had not got quite out of perspective as she had; he was better informed. What had driven him to his half confession he hardly knew. It was really his honesty, because he wanted to speak of Eunice before he went away and make a last effort for her.

"How about Eunice?"

"But if—if your honour is already pledged?"

"It's nothing of that sort," he answered hastily.

She was afraid of what more she might hear, literally afraid. Since the day, nineteen years ago, that she had left his father, her ears had been closed against such stories as these. She found herself no better able to bear them now than she had been then.

"Don't tell me, I am trying not to be intolerant. Don't tell me more than you are compelled."

"I'm not compelled to tell you anything. I wish now I had not spoken at all."

Lady Grindelay said quickly that she, too, wished it. She had an extraordinary physical repulsion from him, only momentary, however.

"You'd rather see her dead than give her to me now? You'd put the world between us if you could?" Desmond said angrily.

"I can't let you wrong any woman. You must let me think. . . ."

She was flushed inside and out with the shame of what

he had done. To her it was as bad as if he had been a girl. She could see little difference. But that was her folly, her altruistic folly. She almost knew it, and that she ought never to have been the mother of a son.

When Desmond found himself alone he knew he had made an ass of himself. That his mother was a good woman he had no doubt. But he had made a mistake in thinking her worldly wise. He felt very miserable.

"Was there ever such a mother? I can't be myself with her at all," his thoughts ran. "One minute she'll be for giving me the earth, and the next for kicking me out. What does she know about temptation? Why, just nothing at all. And how can I explain it to her."

"Oh, Desmond!" Eunice came in breathlessly. "There's Lady John downstairs and the Metherbys. I'm going down to pour out tea. You'll come, won't you? They'll be wanting to see you."

"No." He actually could not even face Eunice at this moment. Turning his back to her, he stared out of the window. "No. I haven't got much time, and I can't waste it on outsiders."

She went over to the table.

"Are these the lists? Are these all the things you've got to get? What a quantity! You and auntie have been talking for a long time, haven't you?" she added innocently.

He came away from the window abruptly, inconsequently, came to where she stood.

"Perhaps you'd like to hear what we've been talking about?" he asked her. He seemed quite angry and unlike himself. "It was about *you*."

"Me?"

"*You*."

She met his eyes with surprise in her own. Then hers went down, and she heard her heart beating so fast that she thought he too must hear it.

"You haven't forgotten what I said to you under the oak at Marley?" he went on. He was in for it now, and a little reckless. "Have you forgotten?"

"No."

"I was right about Michael McKay wanting you, wasn't I?" He came a step nearer to her. "Wasn't I?" he repeated.

"Yes."

"What did you tell him?"

"I told him——"

"Go on." He was very near to her, and she had the habit of candour with him.

"I told him about you and me," she faltered.

"You told him that! You hadn't forgotten, then? But you've been so different to me."

"I thought you'd been different to me."

"What do you think now?"

"I think you are the same."

A thousand memories were between them and about them. Words were almost unnecessary, because the memories were as loud as words. He had his arms quickly about her.

"Darling!"

"Is that what you and Aunt Agatha were talking about?" she whispered.

"She won't hear of it. She's quite right, too. I'm not good enough for you, not nearly good enough. I'm as bad as bad can be, or I'd not be talking like this to you now. But I'm going away, and I love you. Whatever I've done, I've never left off loving you."

"What have you done?" she asked innocently. "I am sure it has been nothing very bad."

"Yes, I have. How can I tell you? I won't tell you. Eunice, she'll never give her consent. She is too old to understand. Can't we do without it? Let's throw everybody overboard. Have you got the courage? Do you care enough about me? I'm in such a devil of a mess. I want you so badly. Come away with me."

His eyes were bloodshot. He did not mean a word of it; never held her more closely nor entreated her as if he had been a man, or anything but the unhappy and distracted boy he found himself. "Marry me at once, with or without her consent."

"But she's always been so good to me—to us," she faltered out, in astonishment. "How can I? You don't mean it."

"And wouldn't I be good to you? Who wouldn't be good to you? What is she to either of us compared to what we are to each other. Come away with me, Eunice. I don't know what I'll do if you don't." For now he felt the down of her cheek against his own and the softness of her lips. Both their hearts were beating fast.

"What is she to either of us compared to what we are to each other."

Those were the words Lady Grindelay heard as she stood on the threshold of the room. From time immemorial mothers have listened or heard the same, but to this one they seemed unbearable. Moved to sudden anger and unreason in pain, the words rushed from her, the words that should never have been spoken.

"This is how you intrigue against me, while I—I have been only planning to help you, to do you service. You are, after all, nothing but your father over again, treacherous, cruel, unfaithful——"

Eunice came swiftly to her, would have pleaded, but Lady Grindelay put her on one side.

"Have you told her that you are not even free? Is no woman safe from you?"

"It's a lie. She isn't in danger from me."

"Don't say unkind things to Desmond, auntie."

"I know what to say to Desmond."

But she knew so little what to say to him, and said it so badly that when he left her he believed himself to be unworthy and tainted, that it did not matter what became of him, that he had no chance of winning Eunice.

And it was all because she loved him and had never learnt the language of love; because of her ignorance and want of reasoning power.

CHAPTER XV

THE next day and the next the girl hung about her with question in her eyes, but Desmond stayed away. The weeks passed. Then they heard he had joined his regiment, and suddenly, without any preparation at all, that he was going out to South Africa! Lady Grindelay herself had made it possible, but no one was more stunned than Lady Grindelay. There was a great shortage of officers. Colonel Metherby had influence at the War Office, and Agatha had asked him to use it. He had used it so well that after only six weeks' training, and with only his commission in the Militia, Desmond was to be attached to the battalion Colonel Metherby himself commanded and to go out with him.

Letters went to and fro between mother and son—strange, strained letters. She wanted his forgiveness, but did not know how to ask for it; to keep him in England, but knew that there was no longer the possibility. He wrote her that everything she had said to him was justified, he begged her not to oppose or throw obstacles in the way of his going away, to let him have this chance. Her two wooden idols, duty and conscience, still stood upon their altar; now she hung her maternity upon the crucifix between, and sacrificed to that also.

She stipulated that he was to come to Marley to bid them good-bye, and he came down in time for lunch. Any strangeness or strained relations between them were covered by the circumstances and the shortness of his stay. Everything was being hurried in the general unpreparedness, in the face of ominous rumours. She could think of nothing but that she was sending him into danger, perhaps into death, that it was to this her mother-love had brought him.

As for Eunice, she thought little of the war and a great deal of what Desmond would say to her about the future. She knew he cared for her, and wanted to hear him say so

again. There had never been anybody for her but Desmond, and since he had spoken to her in Grosvenor Street, she knew without any shadow of doubt that it was the same with him. She thought that her aunt opposed a marriage between them because they were both so young. She thought that everything would come right when Desmond came home again, and hoped for the opportunity to tell him so.

"When she knows how we feel about it, when she sees how much we are to each other, it will be all right. She loves us both. You have always thought she did not love you, but I know better. She has that cold manner, but it doesn't mean anything. I saw her looking at that portrait you sent us, the one in uniform. She said to herself, 'That is my son, my only son.' I saw her trembling lips saying it."

This is what Eunice meant to say to Desmond. She made up her mind she would not be shy with him; but would tell him, too, what she had not told in the library that afternoon in Grosvenor Street, that she loved him completely, thought of him by night and day. She flushed warmly two or three times during luncheon at the thought of what she would say to him when they were alone together.

But she never told him.

There was business talk from which she was excluded. Lady Grindelay had been generous in making provision for her son, and he spoke feelingly of her generosity, thanking her for it. His gratitude, or the expression of it, was like a reproach to her. She liked to give, and it seemed to her now that she had given him so little—only the right to leave her in this way. She was nevertheless somewhat surprised to find him business-like in his talk of money, and anxious that his allowance should be paid into a London bank, quarterly and in advance.

Afterwards they sat in the drawing-room together, the three of them, making talk. It seemed unnatural, unreal, that they should be sitting like this. And the talk was unreal, too, jerky, superficial, almost stupid.

"We might have gone to Southampton to see you off, if we had thought about it in time."

"I'm glad you didn't," he said hastily, and added: "I'm sure you'd have hated it."

"I don't suppose you will be gone very long. I should not be surprised at all if the war was over before you got out."

"I hope not."

"You might come back without an arm or a leg, like the heroes in fiction," Eunice heard herself saying.

"Or still without a moustache," Lady Grindelay added with that stiff lightness that was all of which she was capable. She had had all his childhood and youth, and let them go past her unheeding. He had hardly seemed hers before; now none of her possessions counted but him.

She had never held him in her arms, strained him to her heart, and she knew she could not do it now, that there would be no scene of reconciliation between them nor emotion. She could not be other than the woman she was, incapable of demonstrativeness. Yet he stood now upon her heart, and it was pain made her speechless.

"Well, I must be going," he said at length, rising. "I said the dog-cart was to be round at three."

"Can't we go to the station, auntie?"

Eunice said "we," but meant "I."

"The barouche is already ordered."

"Can't we walk?" poor Eunice stammered out. It was for that she had been waiting, but Desmond had made no move. Nothing had come about as she had expected; they had not had one word together. And he had hardly looked at her. All his constrained talk had been for his mother, although she herself had always been first with him. Her heart swelled, but the sweetness of her disposition prevailed and acknowledged his mother's right; she, at least, had never doubted that Desmond's mother loved him. Desmond himself did not doubt it to-day; he hardly remembered that there had been anger between them.

At the station Lady Grindelay's self-possession was a defence, her strength and hardness but an outpost. She spoke hurriedly and impulsively, said the absurd thing.

"You will take care of yourself. You will remember you are my only son. You will not expose yourself unnecessarily to danger?"

"I'll be all right," he answered awkwardly.

When the train was in, and the last moment had come, she kissed him as she had never kissed him before. She kept her arm about him a minute.

"Only come back to me," she said.

When he returned her kiss, that too was with a difference, and there was something very like a sob in his throat.

"You've been awfully good to me. I wish I'd been a better son."

"Come back, only come back, and everything will be different."

"You won't think worse of me than you can help?" His voice was husky.

"I shall remember only that you are my son."

"You'll—you'll tell her nothing! I may never come back. I—I couldn't get out of it."

It seemed as if he would have said more, but they were at cross purposes. He was everything to her, but to him she was only his mother.

He did not kiss Eunice, he hardly even said good-bye; it would have seemed he did not see her on the platform. Only at the last, at the very last, when she stood there, stunned with the fact that he had gone, gone without a word, she met his eyes through the window of the carriage, and saw that there was yearning and misery in them. She knew then, instinctively, that it was not because he did not care for her that he had not kissed her good-bye.

Poor Desmond! He was alone in the carriage, and if either Eunice or his mother had seen him when the train steamed out of the station, they would have been satisfied he was not parting from them coldly or callously. He broke down when he found himself alone, cried, not like a soldier, but like a child. He never thought to see them again; almost hoped he never would. He knew now he might have won

Eunice as well as his mother, and that he had only himself to blame because it was impossible.

He had made an irreparable blunder. If he had told the truth he might never have got his commission. If he came back it would be to face a situation that already seemed unfaceable. He was going out to fight the Boers, not with the fear of death, but with the hope of it. He was married to Gabrielle Radlett—married! And there was not a fibre of his heart that was not entwined round the girl to whom he had not dared to say good-bye, whose hand he had not dared to touch.

Eunice and Lady Grindelay drove back to Marley Court in silence. Desmond had gone. There was no more to be said; there was only to wait until he came back—a short time.

“He will remain in the army, I suppose, until he gets his captaincy; then he will come back and settle down,” Lady Grindelay said as she got out of the carriage. “I should not look so forlorn about it if I were you.”

“It’s such a long time.” Eunice’s lips trembled. Each of them wanted solitude, the old one not less than the young, and that the other should not see her tears.

By dinner-time they were calmer. Both of them really believed in the legend of Boer farmers armed with Bibles, both of them were possessed by a vague idea that if there were to be serious fighting it would be done by the soldiers in the ranks, that officers were practically immune; that they shouted orders and awaited events at a safe distance.

“It is not as if it were India or Egypt; there is no native treachery to fear. I don’t suppose the troops will ever have to go beyond Cape Town,” Lady Grindelay said during dinner.

It was not only on that evening Agatha reassured Eunice—and perhaps herself. As the troopship with Desmond on board neared the Cape reassurance became necessary.

The morning papers came late to Marley. Long before Desmond went they had been impatient for their arrival, following the progress of the war, surprised, incredulous that the Boers were not already on their knees suing for peace;

conscious already, although neither voiced it, of a faint and dawning anxiety.

There had flashed along the cables news of the engagement at Talana Hill. It was accounted a victory, the beginning of the end. The correspondents reported that when our troops came back from that pyrrhic victory, soddened with rain, plastered with mud, dog-tired, but in the best of spirits, they marched into Ladysmith with colours flying, amid the cheers of their comrades. Into Ladysmith! But that was in October, 1899.

The anxiety deepened all the time, but they disguised it from each other.

He will be disappointed if it is all over before he gets there," said Lady Grindelay, when she read of the marching into Ladysmith.

Flashed through the cables the story of Percy Scott and the guns at Ladysmith. What did it mean? Surely those naval guns would not be needed. In a week now, six days now, to-morrow now, Desmond would be at Cape Town. And still the Boers had not laid down their arms!

How absurd it seems in retrospect, how incredible! Yet all through the country there was the same opinion, the same optimism, the same expectations that sons, husbands and fathers were only out on parade. For a short time, a very short time, those at home were only proud, not afraid. Then, one after another, from here and there and everywhere, from places that had never been heard of, from men whose names were unknown, came stories of disaster and blunder—inconceivable, unbelievable stories. English officers taken prisoners with all their men, laying down their arms; English officers surrendering with their troops!

The mistress of Marley and Eunice read with amazement, read with bewilderment, read with hot shame and pain, as thousands of others were reading. They could hardly face each other's eyes; began to be afraid to speak, yet hardly content out of each other's sight; dreading the long hours between the posts, dreading the posts even more.

Before they realised what was occurring, what manner of

men were these Boer farmers, there flashed along the cables casualty lists from Elandslaagte, from Rietfontein. The poor, proud women in their English homes read of the blunder of Nicholson's Nek, the catastrophe of Colesberg.

Now the women no longer sent out their beloved gladly and proudly, but hung upon their necks begging them not to go, imploring, praying. And now they were unheeded. Story after story came through, setting men aflame.

"It was our young captain. Father, father, we'd rather have died than surrender, if it had been left to us," cried a passionate Irish Fusilier to his priest. The *Times* printed the story.

Here, in England, grey old men flushed with shame as they read, and rushed to the War Office begging, praying for employment, to be sent out, at their own expense, in any corps, with any rank, only to wipe out the stain on the flag. Young men laid down fishing-rod and golf clubs, Stock Exchange lists, measuring tapes. Office boy and clerk, drapers' assistants, and even those young men whose recreation it was to watch other people play cricket or football, awoke shamefacedly to their country's needs, and volunteered in great squads of awkwardness and incapacity. The War Office was besieged, overwhelmed, and in alarm and non-comprehension of what was required, took everybody who applied, hurriedly fitted up, hurriedly sent out, incapable braves, lacking arms, horses, accoutrements, constitutions; added muddle to muddle, courting disaster. An old story now, a sad old story, illustrated with sad old graves, with hearths made for ever desolate. Most of us have forgotten; a few of us can never forget.

Now neither Lady Grindelay nor Eunice could hide her anxiety—anxiety that amounted sometimes to anguish, that made their nights sleepless and their days one long apprehension. They could not stay at Marley waiting for the belated posts. They moved back to London, took another furnished house, waited for news. Here they were surrounded by friends in like case, their hearts sick with fear, faces pale with watching, many already in mourning. Here, fortunately,

too, they found there was work they could do. Disaster after disaster fell on the bruised national spirit, until London, at least, was all one ache—work the only emollient. There were bandages to be made, comforters knitted or sewn for field-hospital or ambulance, charity concerts or matinées to be organised. Lady Grindelay braced herself with such things, maintained an appearance of courage as a Wanstead should. She had learned her lesson well by now, and what it was to be the mother of a son; the knowledge came to her so late, and with more than birth-pain. It became a physical thing, this pain, and the memory of Desmond and the wasted days when she had not cared for him. As the days wore on the pain concentrated in one place in her side. Night and day it ached there.

Agatha, although she was nearly sixty years of age, was a strong and vigorous woman at the beginning of the Boer war. Before the end of it she had grown into old age. She never disguised from herself that it was she who had sent him out. Not her reticence, but the poor remnant of her self-confidence forsook her. There were times when she could only cry for him, others when, in the solitude of her bedroom, she would pray wildly.

Desmond was "slightly wounded" at Magersfontein. This gave her temporary release from the worst of her anxieties. They heard that he was in hospital, and hoped that he would be invalided home. Eunice and she had their short time of indomitable hope, when every hour might bring the news that he had embarked. There were names among the fallen that made their gratitude humble. There was no heir now for Denham, and none for Eversleigh. But Desmond was coming home.

Never in her young days had Agatha known love. Now it came upon her like a wild beast hungered, hot breathed and panting, the unsatiated passion and pain of her late maternity; all the knowledge she had avoided, from which her dignity and her position were alike powerless to protect her. She could put her hand now to where the pain burned always. Already she suspected the hurt was to death.

Eunice hardly knew what ailed her the night she went from her own room to her aunt's. But at the thought that Desmond was on his way, and might be home any day now, a sudden intensity of longing for him seized upon her. It had lain in wait for her all day, and in the night it rose until a moment when it became unbearable—unbearable, that is, in solitude. She woke to a sudden craving, she wanted Desmond as starving men want food, as brown grass needs rain, as panting animals crave for water. The rush of longing for him, burning her cheeks, inflaming her blood, and hammering in her brain, was the end of a dream; it flooded her, came and came again. She had no knowledge to make her ashamed of this intolerable thirst; when she began to think coherently it seemed there was nothing between her and the assuagement of it, but Lady Grindelay's opposition. Before Desmond came home she must get her aunt's promise that she would no longer stand between them. He might be here any time now. Perhaps he had already started. Nothing must be between them when he came.

She started up in bed when this thought came to her; she could not go on lying there in the darkness. She did not stay to reason, she was driven by her thirst. Swiftly, in her white nightgown, barefooted, she slipped out of her warm bed, paused an irresolute moment, then was through the door, along one passage and across the other, knocking at her aunt's door, and in the room without waiting for an answer to her knock.

Lady Grindelay was hardly startled. She, too, was awake, reading by candle-light.

"Come in. Shut the door." She never even asked if there was anything the matter.

"I had to come," Eunice began falteringly.

"Without a dressing-gown?" But the rebuke was perfunctory.

"It's quite warm. You don't mind? I didn't wake you?"

"No; I was not asleep."

Agatha was glad of company, and looked round for cover for her.

"Wrap yourself in my dressing-gown—there it is, hanging over the chair."

Eunice disregarded the suggestion, standing by the side of the bed, shivering a little.

"I couldn't sleep."

Neither had Agatha been able to.

"The days and nights are long. Come under the quilt, you may be able to sleep here."

Eunice lay beside her aunt, but sleep was far from her.

"I want to talk about Desmond," Eunice whispered presently.

"You have been lying awake, thinking of him?"

"No, sleeping and dreaming. I'm glad you put out the candle. Auntie, don't you want to talk about him? He is on his way home. You will never be angry with him about anything again? We've known what it is to be without him."

"You blame me for sending him? But he would have gone anyhow when it came to this."

"How could I blame you? I know he would have gone anyhow. He always meant to be a soldier."

"Did he? He never told me." How little he had ever told her; how little she had encouraged him to talk!

"When he comes back we shall both be older. I know it was because you thought we were both too young. You'll say 'Yes' when he comes back. It was because you thought us too young, wasn't it? But I'm not too young now,—*I want him.*"

"I want him, too," Agatha answered, forlornly, and indeed her hunger for him ached within her.

"He always loved you, and wanted you to love him. When he was little—always," Eunice said consolingly.

"I think it is true; sometimes I think it is true. Incidents occur to me." It was a relief to speak, to unburden herself.

"Tell me about them, I can't sleep; I want to talk about Desmond. Tell me stories about him."

"What am I to tell you? How hard and cold I must have seemed to him always, the pain I have in recalling it?" She had forgotten to whom she was speaking, she was talking to herself.

"He'll never remember it when he comes back, when you tell him that everything is—is all right for us."

"I always failed him; I know it now. When he was quite a little fellow, about seven years old, never at ease with me, never as he was with that old Irish nurse of his, he came through the window of the drawing-room with a bunch of flowers in his hand, daisies and marigolds. They were for me, I know now they were for me. I don't know what I said, something about coming in by the door, or muddy boots, although I liked to see him there, although my heart beat faster for seeing him there. But I was born dumb, like that, and everything has passed me by. He threw the flowers at me, fled away, was rude and sullen afterwards, defiant. My son, my little son! And now I am an old woman, and alone——"

"Go on, go on," Eunice said softly. She was calmer now. Her thirst had left her. She only wanted to talk of him, of all he had ever said or done. Agatha went on slowly, her conscience was very oppressed and clamorous to-night, but talking eased it.

"Once, when I was lying on the lawn—he must have thought I was asleep, because my book had fallen, and my eyes were shut—he crept near me, stood there, then quite hastily picked up the rug to put over my feet, and ran away lest I should see him."

"Go on."

"I said cold things to him, cold, reasonable things always. I kept him at arm's length."

"He loved you," whispered Eunice comfortingly. "All his rough shyness was because he loved you. I knew it, but we never spoke about it in actual words. When we were little I used to say, 'Why don't you climb on her knee? Why don't you kiss her like I do?'"

"I didn't want to be kissed. I never cared for kissing."

A thrill ran through the girl, a happy thrill; and although it was dark she hid her head.

"I do," she whispered, "I do."

Her cheeks were flooded; but she was not really ashamed.

"Desmond and I like kissing."

"I never did," Agatha answered. "I don't know why, but I never did."

Then quite suddenly she found herself antagonistic, strangely and inconceivably antagonistic. The girl would have nestled against her, gone on talking, but she sent her away as soon as possible, told her she must go back to bed, and to sleep, she must not encourage herself in such feelings as she described.

CHAPTER XVI

DESMOND did not come home; he had apparently no thought of home-coming. He wrote a hurried line—hurried lines were all they had from him—saying that his wound was almost healed, it had only been a scratch, and he was being attached to one of the Mounted Infantry Corps.

It had all to be gone over again, the watching and the waiting. They read of Spion Kop and Pieter's Hill, heard details and envisaged them.

From their window in Grosvenor Street they saw, under blue and alien skies, the English soldiers moving slowly over the veldt in close formation, while the distant guns or the spitting pom-poms raked their thinning columns, and from the sheltering kopjes, the Transvaalers, with their deadly rifles, picked off the officers still conspicuously accoutred. And always under helmet or cap, they saw Desmond's face, smoke-begrimed, hard-set and determined, his eyes blue and alight, marching to danger or to death.

Desmond was mentioned in despatches. Michael came to them with the news. Michael was proving himself in these days. Like every other Englishman from public school and university, he was ashamed to walk the streets of London in a black coat; his arms ached for a gun, and his heart for his country. Duty held him here, his father was getting an old man, and had no other son. Michael was as brave at his post as our soldiers at theirs, although his post was only an office. Lady Grindelay and Eunice had not to wait for the newspapers. He haunted the War Office, was often before the evening papers with news.

There was no meanness in Michael. He loved the girl in her pallor and anxiety better than he had loved her that sunny day in Cornwall, and he knew his love was for ever. But her heart was with Desmond. That, too, he knew now, and he brought her the tale of his bravery as he would have

brought her his heart's blood if it would have helped her pale anxiety. The tale of Desmond's bravery was one of many that helped to cover the incompetence of our generals, the failure of our Intelligence Department, the insufficiency of our cavalry.

In one of the little engagements, when the order to retreat was sounded, young Lord Grindelay disregarded it. He galloped forward to the help of a comrade, caught at the horse's bridle, held up the wounded man, and cantered back calmly, through a dropping patter of bullets. There was no Victoria Cross for such a deed, there were too many of them. But he was mentioned in despatches, was recognised as a promising young officer.

Again they hoped. Surely the end of the war was in sight. Any day the news of the relief of Ladysmith might come and that would mean the end.

"Lest we forget."

So much has been forgotten, but never this, surely never this. The appalling day when there brooded over London, over the country, a fear that knocked like a living thing at every heart, when every face one met in the street was a grey mask, and men walked hurriedly past their fellow-men that they should not see what it hid.

Would White surrender? Must White surrender?

In big black type, on poster and paper, on men's brains, and fear-parched hearts, the words were printed.

ATTACK CONTINUES; ENEMY REINFORCED
ATTACK RENEWED
VERY HARD PRESSED

The heliograph broke off here. Men were stark with apprehension and walked the streets that day as one walks in the valley of the shadow of death; death and humiliation.

But Desmond was not in Ladysmith. The two women who loved him had that with which to comfort themselves. A small, dry comfort at best, and one that lasted but a brief time. It was difficult to follow the movements of the units,

difficult to understand the plan of the scattered campaign. They thought him still in the region of Magersfontein, or perhaps nearing Kimberley, when Michael came to them unexpectedly and in haste, with a face that showed them before he spoke that it was not good tidings he bore. He could keep nothing back from them because in less than an hour from the time he came it might be shouted in the streets. All the bad news was shouted in the streets. To those with dear ones out there in the fighting line there was no respite, the taut nerves were jangled a dozen times a day.

Again a small reconnoitring force had been sent out, this time under the leadership of Lord Grindelay, had unexpectedly met the enemy, and been overpowered. The enemy were in shelter, the small reconnoitring party was within a couple of hundred yards of them when they opened fire. A Kaffir guide had led them straight into the ambush. The rifles blazed out, the men fell like birds in a drive. It was one of a hundred such stories. Lord Grindelay was reported missing. *Missing*. Michael could tell them no more than that for many a long day, although he haunted the War Office. When he heard more, he could hardly bear to tell them. Yet always it seemed better he should be before the newspapers.

Lord Grindelay was reported missing because his body had not been found. He had led his men into the ambush. One of them, who crawled back to camp, gave the cabled account of what had occurred.

"We were marching along when, without any warning, there came a devil's hail of bullets and our men began to fall. Lord Grindelay rallied us and we returned the fire as well as we were able. Not that we'd anything to shoot at; they were hidden behind kopjes or entrenched in pits. I shot every round I had with me before I came away, but I never saw one reach its billet. They called out to us to surrender; there was nothing else to be done. But young Lord Grindelay, he wouldn't have it at any price. I saw his horse shot away under him and that they'd shattered his arm. 'Surrender be damned, surrender be damned!' I heard him call

out all in a rage. He kept shouting to the men to keep together and blazing away until the last. Fair riddled with bullets he was when he fell. . . .”

“Lord Grindelay reported missing,” was the War Office statement. They hoped, they hoped until this tale came through.

Then they went back to Marley to get through their days as well as they were able. Agatha’s pain grew sometimes to flaming agony when she thought of her ravaged motherhood, when she could not get away from the knowledge that she had sent him to his death.

She went back to Marley, took up her life as before, her strangely altered life. She had once thought she loved her home, thought that Marley and her responsibilities there would suffice her. Now the grey house and green grounds were empty and drear: the days passed heavily. Remorse gnawed at her dully and continuously, until all her pride was eaten away and her strength with it.

When Monica ran away she had been unhappy, but looking back she remembered how much younger she had been and better able to bear it. That she had blundered in her marriage seemed nothing to her now, for the blunder had given her a son. She had not dealt wisely with him, not understood what had come to her until it was too late, but now he filled every cranny of her mind. He had asked her for Eunice, and she had refused; but if he had been given back to her she would refuse him nothing.

She and the girl sat in the drawing-room at the work that had superseded their embroidery; becoming adepts in knitting stockings, experts in making bed-jackets, flannel coats for hospital patients, wristlets, mittens, all the stores that our field-hospitals lacked. It was true that Lord Grindelay was reported “missing”; his name was not on that long endless roll of the honoured dead. But how could hope survive the scene they saw in waking or sleeping hours? The useless arm, the shot horse falling under him, the hail of bullets and the defiance ringing out, “No surrender,” on his desperate lips as he fell. They knew now that many had

been buried where they fell, the Boer leader reading the burial service over them, no means of identification left. If Desmond had been alive he would have been held for ransom or exchange; news of him would have come through.

Yet some dim hope still smouldered, although it was but as a guttering wick that flickered and went out sometimes as the slow days dragged on. Talk was difficult between them at first, for something lay behind speech. Jealousy, perhaps, and on the girl's part in those early days a faint resentment, resentment that could not last, for soon she saw that Lady Grindelay's suffering was beyond her own, although so speechless.

"Whatever had happened he would have gone to the war," she burst out one day, in the midst of turning a heel, counting stitches.

"I made it easy for him," Lady Grindelay replied, speaking her thought aloud. "But for me he might never have gone."

"Don't feel like that, don't make it worse," Eunice cried out and went over to her desperately. "Don't let us be silent with each other, auntie. Sometimes I can't bear to see your hopeless face."

She knelt beside her, hiding her own.

Agatha went on knitting, the click of the needles never stopped.

"Leave off working, I can't bear the sound of the needles, I can't work any more. What's the use of it? What's the use of anything?" the girl sobbed weakly.

"The soldiers are without stockings."

"I don't care, I only pretended to care. I was only working for Desmond and Desmond's men, all the time. Every stitch I put in was for him. Now he isn't there——" She couldn't speak for crying. She had not meant to say this, but to comfort her aunt in some way, to break the silence of her sorrow.

"Sometimes I don't believe it, I don't believe he is dead," she went on through her tears.

"Don't buoy yourself with false hopes. What hope is there?" Click, click went the needles.

"I make stories, dream he has escaped or was taken prisoner, was nursed by a Boer woman and restored to us; it helps the days and nights."

"How long can you go on dreaming?"

"Until the war is ended, until all the prisoners are released. Then—then——"

"Speak out. What have you in your mind for when the war ends?"

The click of the needles helped the harshness of her voice.

"Then we might go out together, you and I, see the place where he fell, put up a cross. But it won't happen, I know it won't happen; he can't be dead, our Desmond."

And then she cried more violently.

"You at least have nothing with which to reproach yourself," Lady Grindelay said, with dry lips, going on mechanically with the violet woollen muffler, her hands stained from it. That was what she spoke of presently. She could not afford to break down, much of her time was spent in hiding her agony of mind.

"I must try and find some wool of which the colour is fast."

The sound of Eunice sobbing went to that place inside her where the pain was always; adding a little to it. But her voice was steady, and there was no pause in her knitting.

Many days there were like these, many hours. Lady Grindelay seemed to grow grey and cold as the steel pins that went in and out the wool; unapproachable. Eunice solaced herself with dreams.

Meanwhile in London something was happening that was to affect them both, something which even now Andrew and Michael were on their way to tell them.

Michael, perhaps with the same hope that Eunice cherished, still went daily to the War Office, still tried to believe Desmond was only missing, not dead, that there would yet be news of him.

He came back one day from that fruitless visit, hot foot

to his father. Andrew was at work as usual. The world went on although to many it seemed as if it were standing still everywhere but out there in South Africa. But in the McKay office leases were still being prepared, and assignments, even marriage settlements. Andrew put his pen down when he saw Michael's face.

"You have news?"

"Father, is there any other Lady Grindelay but the one we know?"

"Than Agatha?"

"Yes."

"Of course not; why do you ask? How could there be?"

"There couldn't be? You are sure?"

"Quite sure."

"There is another Lady Grindelay, or a woman who calls herself so, asking daily at the War Office for news of Desmond. I heard a rumour of it once or twice but did not credit it, thought there had been some mistake. But I have just seen her; spoken to her."

"Spoken to Lady Grindelay!"

"To a woman who calls herself by that name."

"What is she like?"

"Good-looking, in rather a common way; a woman of about four- or five-and-thirty."

"Not more? You are sure she is not more?"

"About that I should think, certainly under forty. Why? Have you anyone in your mind, any idea? I was startled by the incident, wondering who she could be."

"I was thinking of Biddy Malone, Desmond's old nurse from Ireland. She would do anything, impersonate anybody, to get news of him."

"This was not Biddy Malone. This was a woman with red hair and thin features, a good-looking woman, not quite a lady, but not of the servant class, nor an Irishwoman."

"Did you question her at all?"

"I had no time. She spoke to me. 'You also are inquiring about Lord Grindelay? Alas! there is still no news,' she said, passing me swiftly. But she was dry-eyed, the 'alas'

sounded like affectation. I made inquiries, they told me she had been there every day."

Father and son looked at each other; there fell a short silence between them. Then Andrew spoke slowly. He said only one word, but he said it deliberately:

"Desmond?"

"Impossible," answered Michael hotly.

"Nothing is impossible."

"That would be."

"Why?" The question shot out. "Desmond is not very steady. We saw little of him while he was at Bird's; he came seldom to the house. What makes you say it is impossible that this woman has anything to do with him, that he did not become entangled?" Andrew thought he knew more about the ways of young men than his son.

"I am sure of it," Michael answered doggedly, loyally.

"Because?"

It broke from him then:

"Because Desmond was in love with Eunice."

"With Eunice?"

"It was only Desmond's mother who stood between them. Eunice told me herself. . . ."

He spoke with some difficulty.

"Then that was why——"

The enlightenment, the exclamation fell from Andrew involuntarily. Michael turned his back on his father.

"Yes, that was why I failed with her. We won't speak further of it if you don't mind."

Andrew had never understood why Michael came back from Cornwall without any announcement to make. He had been disappointed, but wise enough not to show it. He knew if there was anything to hear he would have been told. Now he began to understand. He would have liked to say a word of sympathy, to have reminded his son that the girl was still young, Desmond dead. But he refrained, thinking it was better to say nothing, to go on with the matter in hand.

"You heard no more about this woman than that she had been there every day; not where she lives, nor anything else?"

"Nothing." Michael was recovering himself, grateful to his father because the words of sympathy had not been spoken.

"You must go again to-morrow, make a point of speaking to her if she is there. If not, try to find out where she comes from, whether anyone knows anything about her."

"I had first to make sure there was no one else entitled to bear the name, no other branch of the family."

"No one but Desmond's wife, if he had one, could be entitled to call herself Lady Grindelay. This is either an impostor, or—God grant there is no more trouble coming to that poor woman!"

"I feel confident about Desmond."

"I wish I did," his father answered dryly.

CHAPTER XVII

GABRIELLE had no longer any object in concealing Desmond's secret, or her own; rather she had everything to gain by betraying it. She told Michael the whole story the very next day when they met at the War Office, with complete candour, brutal candour. He apologised for addressing her.

"I understand that you are inquiring for Lord Grindelay?"

"Oh! yes. I am Lady Grindelay, that is my name. I have seen you here before, you are perhaps a relative of my husband's?"

"Your husband's?"

"You are a relative of Desmond's?"

"No!" Michael was startled, uncertain what to say, shocked. "I am—we are—my father and I are the family solicitors."

"Then you must be 'Michael'? Of course I have heard him speak of you. There is no news again to-day. It seems as if we never shall have more news now. I have quite lost hope."

She was dressed all in black, but there was no sign of mourning in her face. When Michael first spoke to her she had smiled, and shown her teeth, small, white, even teeth, and the smile was attractive. Her smile was for any man, for all men, even this stiff young lawyer. But now she altered her tactics.

"You are surprised to hear of Desmond's marriage? It was he who wanted it kept secret, not I," she said quickly. "He told me he would not be sent out, he might not have got his commission if he had been known as a married man. He was so keen to go to the war."

She was full of explanation, too full, too ready altogether to talk and explain and admit his right to question her. Michael resented her smile, her voluble talk, everything about her.

When she saw how unappreciative he was she changed her smile to a sigh.

"Poor boy! And now it seems he will never come back! He will never see his little daughter."

"His daughter!" Michael exclaimed, unable to disguise his disgust.

"It was born before its time——"

She may have reddened, Michael was not sure. They were standing together on the steps of the War Office, and the sun was in his eyes.

"You can, of course, give proof of what you are telling me?" He was beginning to recover himself.

She glanced at him, she was taking his measure. Candour suited her purpose, she had no longer anything to gain by concealment.

"Of course. Do you doubt me? I am not lying to you. We were married at the Notting Hill Registry Office a week before he sailed. You can see the entry."

When they went down the steps of the War Office, she suggested that Michael should walk home with her.

"I can show you letters from him. He made a will before he left. I have that too, perhaps you would like to see it." She was quite malicious now, and seemed to have pleasure in giving him proof of her statement.

"You say you have a child by him, that she is some weeks old!"

"Born prematurely." There was no blush about her, and her step by his side was quite brisk. Michael thought her utterly shameless and was quite revolted by her, although he went on mechanically walking by her side. He had not to use any skill in cross-examining her, nor any detective quality to understand that she was admitting the reason Desmond married her before his departure. He went in at her invitation when they reached the flat, and saw the marriage certificate, the outside of the will. He even heard the cry of a baby from some inner room. Nothing was wanting for his enlightenment.

The flat was in Buckingham Palace Gardens. The sitting-

room into which Gabrielle took Michael was handsomely furnished, full of flowers, heaped with disorderly expensive things, redolent of scent, suggestive. Only the cry of the baby was incongruous as it came through the wall.

"I can't go on like this any longer," she told Michael after she had shown him her proofs. "I have waited as long as I am able. If he had not been killed I would have kept the secret until he came back, but as it is, what is the use?" She shrugged her expressive shoulders. "One cannot live without money. If you had not spoken to me to-day I should have had to look you up."

Michael saw for himself that she could not go on living in this way without money.

Now Desmond was no longer there to draw against it, his allowance was not paid into the bank. His mother's allowance to Desmond had been a liberal one, and had provided all these luxuries.

"If you will read his will"—Michael had the document in his hand but had not opened it—"you will see that he has left me everything he had."

"Desmond had nothing to leave."

Michael was embarrassed at the position in which he found himself, explaining to this woman of whose very existence he had been unaware four-and-twenty hours ago, that practically Desmond had been dependent upon his mother's generosity, that the Languedoc estate brought in nothing. But she was not embarrassed, nor backward in examining him quickly, cleverly, closely. Desmond had told her something of his dependence upon his mother, but she wanted it confirmed.

"In any case, there will be my pension."

Michael got away from her as soon as he could, as soon as she would let him. She was a new experience to Michael, and one with whom he felt himself unable to cope. He went back to his father when at last he made his escape.

"You must see her, father. I can hardly convey to you her self-assurance, want of taste or feeling, her manner generally. She seems utterly callous to his fate, thinking only of what provision there is for her. She assumes quite coolly

that Desmond's mother will accept her story; that we shall. I don't see what else we can do. I have never met anyone at all like her. There certainly was a baby—I heard it. It seems incredible. I am afraid you will have to see her yourself."

Andrew questioned him, letting all other work stand over while he considered this.

"You say she is four or five-and-thirty, twelve or fourteen years Desmond's senior. Where did they meet? How long had they known each other?"

"I didn't ask, I was so overwhelmed. You had suggested the explanation of her calling herself Lady Grindelay, but when I spoke to her I still did not believe it; I thought it impossible."

"We can't do anything without consulting Agatha. I don't think we can move without that. But I will see the woman myself first, as you say, question her, make certain. I suppose you have seen the original of the certificate?"

"I went up to the registry office on my way here. Everything is in order; the clerk witnessed, he remembers it perfectly."

"Has she got a telephone? Get on to the telephone and ask for an appointment for me. We mustn't waste time. We can't risk Agatha hearing of this from anyone but us. Let me see, to-day is Thursday. If she must be told, if the incredible story is true, we had better go down to Marley on Saturday. We must break it gently if it has to be broken. I shan't wire, but just write a line offering ourselves for a visit. It's a dreadful business. Twelve or fourteen years older than he is! Not a word to anybody! What could the boy have been thinking of? I'll write Agatha a line myself. It will go hard with her if this woman is all you describe. Not that there is ever any saying what Agatha will feel called upon to do. She may think she is bound to adopt the baby, open her house to the woman. I'm sure I don't know what she *will* do." But he was filled with sympathy for his old friend.

Gabrielle Radlett was quite as frank with Andrew in their interview as she had been with Michael, more so perhaps.

In some ways she had always found old men more easily dealt with than young ones. Michael had been very stiff and reserved with Gabrielle. Andrew, recognising in less than ten minutes where she stood in the kingdom of women, met her there, displaying no distaste, encouraging her to talk, getting from her one or two clues that were useful to him later on. She compared him favourably with his son, thinking to please him, saying she was satisfied to leave her affairs in his hands, that he must get what he could for her from Desmond's mother if it were true that Desmond's own estate would really be so small. He learnt now that she had nursed Desmond through his illness.

"I am sure you will do the best you can for me," she said with emphasis.

It had been her trade to flatter men, she had no reason to think this grizzled one was an exception.

Andrew's face was grave when he left her. She was so much worse than he had expected; so entirely beyond the pale. He could not see Agatha accepting her son's wife, nor himself advising her to. But he knew Agatha's sense of duty, and how impossible it was to influence her. No one, not even he, could be sure of how she would act.

He went down to Marley on Saturday, full of misgiving. Michael was with him, each with his heart full of the two to whom they were not taking solace, but something worse than grief. The train went on and they read their newspapers; there was little they could say to each other. Michael allowed himself to dwell on what might happen when Eunice knew of Desmond's marriage. He was really delicate-minded, and when he believed Desmond was dead, he had respected her grief, not hoped, nor thought of himself at all. But this was different. Desmond married was less a rival than Desmond dead, and Michael allowed himself to dream on his way to Marley.

The brougham was waiting for them at the station. Lady Grindelay and Eunice met them at the lodge. Somehow or other, perhaps because Gabrielle had worn black, they were glad to find neither Agatha nor Eunice in mourning. Eunice

was pale in her white summer skirt and pink shirt. Lady Grindelay had not abandoned her old-fashioned clothes, but now they seemed becoming and appropriate to her. She was over sixty and had no wish to disguise her age. She wore a tailor-made coat and skirt; no hat was on her grey hair that had been allowed to grow and was now in a smooth knot; her figure was still slender and upright, the instep still high and well booted. She was careful about her hands, and wore wash-leather gloves. Her complexion had faded, but there were few wrinkles. This was the first visit the McKays had paid to Marley since Desmond went away, and all of them wanted to avoid remembering it, to keep from any untoward allusion or remembrance. As they walked through the garden to the house Andrew heard about the erratic *Odontoglossum*. They spoke also of the roses and their late flowering, of the scents from the herb garden.

All through luncheon they kept up the pretence that nothing had changed since they were here before, speaking again of the orchid and the changes in orchid culture. Andrew told of his triumphs in the small Campden Hill hothouse. Lady Grindelay said that if the *Odontoglossum* were to flower now, it would seem like a miracle, as if the clock had been put back. All of them knew the story of how she had opened the door of the orchid house when she was a child because she thought that plants, like children, should have fresh air. She promised Andrew a cutting.

Over their coffee Michael commented intolerantly on the incompetence or folly of this or the other general, spoke of the growing enteric lists; Andrew talked of the various organisations of which Lady Grindelay was the president or patroness, and of how funds and offers of help were coming in, Eunice was enthusiastic about Rudyard Kipling's lyric appeal.

Instinctively Agatha knew Andrew had something to tell her; they had been friends for so long that she could read him through. She knew that when he talked so freely it was for concealment. What he was not saying was what she

wanted to hear. It could not be good news, or he would have told her at once.

"May I take you out on the river after lunch?" Michael asked Eunice when they could no longer linger over their coffee.

Eunice looked questioningly at her aunt, and Lady Grindelay answered quickly:

"That is a good idea of yours, Michael. Eunice does not go out nearly enough. She thinks it her duty to sit with me."

"I don't do it for duty."

Agatha, ignoring the interruption, went on:

"You need not hurry back. Your father and I will find plenty to say to each other."

Eunice went out with Michael at her aunt's bidding. Whenever the McKays came down, there was an hour or so of business talk; it was nothing unusual to leave her aunt and the old lawyer together to talk business. Agatha knew instinctively that this occasion was different. When the hall door closed behind the young people she asked him at once:

"What have you come to tell me?"

"So you guessed?"

"It would be strange, after all these years, if I did not know when you had something on your mind."

He did not attempt to contradict her, to say that he had nothing on his mind. They were still in the dining-room, and now he held the door open for her.

"What is it?" she asked him.

"Wait until we get into the library," he answered. He was in no hurry with his news.

The library, with high, mullioned windows, walls rich with heavy tomes in leather bindings, had an air of great seclusion, calm remoteness. He thought he would find it easier to tell her there. She seated herself at one of the tables, but he remained silent, hardly knowing in what words to clothe his news.

"Surely you are not afraid to tell me?" For he was not speaking. "Is there more trouble with the Irish tenants?"

Are they boycotting me? Or has one of my investments gone wrong?"

She thought nothing he could tell her could affect her greatly. The news he was bringing her could hardly be from South Africa. She knew the worst there was to tell from there; she had abandoned hope, even if Eunice had not; she could not solace herself with dreams as the girl did.

"Don't be afraid to tell me. What could have happened that would distress or move me now?" She gave a short sigh. "Don't look as if the world had come to an end, speak out, you will find I can bear anything you have to tell me. What is wrong in Languedoc or Marley?"

Andrew always took her affairs seriously and with Scotch caution. An unlet or boycotted farm, a drop in the value of a security, never seemed of small importance to him. But she cared so little, so much less than ever.

On Andrew's table, the big library table always known as Andrew's, where many documents of the estate were kept, were parcels ready packed and addressed, big, bulky parcels.

Andrew stood and looked at them.

"You must have been working very hard, you and Eunice. I should think you were working too hard."

Now that he looked at her, he saw that her colour was grey, that she had grown thin.

"Have you been ill, Agatha?" he asked abruptly.

"Nothing to speak of—nothing that matters. Go on with what you have to say to me." But he would not accept her answer. Perhaps he was glad to put off telling his news a little longer.

"Have you seen a doctor? Has Reid been up?"

"You have something to break to me, then—something very bad and bitter?" They knew each other so well. "My health is well enough to stand it; go on!"

"Sixteen parcels altogether! I've been counting them. Stockings and mufflers for an entire regiment. You have been doing too much."

"We had a working bee. This is not all Eunice and myself. What is the trouble, Andrew? What news can there be

that is not from South Africa, and that you are hesitating so to tell me? Have I lost money? A great deal of money?" And then she added with some bitterness: "What do I want money for now? Eunice has enough, and I have no son!" Then she added quickly, rising from her chair as she spoke:

"Your news is about Desmond!"

"Sit down—sit down."

"What news have you brought me?"

"Bad news!" he said briefly.

"About Desmond?" Her courage broke. "Not disgrace, Andrew; don't tell me it is disgrace! Leave me my pride in him, let me think that he died like an Englishman, like a hero; don't tell me differently." Now she was gripping the edge of the table, and there was fear in her eyes; always she saw the spectre of his drunken father. What could it be that Andrew found so hard to tell her? "You have heard a different account of his death?"

"So far as I or anybody else knows, Desmond fell as an Englishman should, calling out 'No surrender!' with his dying lips."

"Thank God! Thank God! Then you can tell me nothing to hurt me." She put her hand to her side and sat down abruptly.

"I am afraid the news I bring is going to hurt you."

"I can bear anything since he died like that. Go on."

He spoke briefly, curtly, since she had to know.

"There is a woman who has been haunting the War Office. Michael met her there several times, inquiring for news of Desmond. At my suggestion he spoke to her. She told him, as she had told the War Office authorities, that she was Lady Grindelay."

He let this sink in, then added, after a short pause:

"She claims to be Desmond's widow!"

"Desmond's widow!"

The words were strange. She repeated them: "Desmond's widow!"

And then it was he, not she, who was surprised, for she added:

"He married her? He did what was right?" Her face was illumined. "My son!" The words were whispered, but he heard the pride in them, the utter pride.

Astonished and incredulous, he exclaimed:

"Then you knew?"

"I was in his confidence." She was glad to be able to say it.

"You knew he was married?" Even now Andrew was incredulous.

"That it was possible."

"Perhaps, too, you are acquainted with the lady?" he asked satirically. "Perhaps you approved of her as a daughter-in-law?" As he had told Michael, there was never any way of counting upon Agatha or foreseeing where her distorted conscientiousness would lead her.

"No, I don't know her," Agatha answered slowly.

"Well, that's one good thing," he exclaimed, brutally enough. "If he married with your consent, you gave it at least with your eyes shut—as usual," he added as an after-thought.

"Why?" Her question shot out.

"Because she is a common——" He had the grace not to say the word. "And ten years his senior at the very least!"

The question had shot out, but the answer was a bullet that reached its mark. Before the smoke of it had passed away he was by her side in alarm; he was asking if he should get brandy for her, ring for her maid. The pain had gripped her suddenly.

"Don't ring!" she got out faintly. "It is nothing—it will pass!"

He waited, stood by her side and waited for her to recover herself. He was acutely sorry for her; wished she were less reserved, more like other women. He stood irresolutely, seeing now how ill she looked, and altered, wondering what she would say or do.

"You have no doubt she is of the class you describe?" she asked him, after a pause.

"None at all," he answered.

"Tell me all you know."

"Don't you think we had better wait a little? You don't look fit to hear it. You must recollect you are not so young as you were."

But she was indomitable.

"I shall never be any younger. Go on, please—go on, tell me all you know."

"Well, if you insist. . . ."

He began to tell her everything that the woman who called herself Desmond's wife had told him, and the little they had learned to supplement it. When he would have paused, she made him go on, nor would be let off anything; it was not her way to evade pain.

"And now the question is: what are we going to do?" he said, when he had finished. He wondered of what particular folly she would be guilty; made sure she would wish to reform the woman, adopt the baby, or take some course equally inadvisable. But Agatha could still surprise him.

"I suppose it is quite certain that my son is dead?" she asked heavily.

"I'm afraid there is but little hope," he answered sadly.

"Then she must be bribed to remain silent," she said surprisingly.

Lady Grindelay was not thinking now of the woman who called herself her son's wife, of the child, or of herself. Her son had loved Eunice, and she him. Eunice was all that was left to her to shelter. The girl had come to her room in the dead of night for comfort or assurance. She thought of that other time when, with her head in Agatha's lap, Eunice had sobbed out how she could not believe that Desmond was really dead, lost to them; how she still saw him in dreams; how, in happy dreams, he came back. Those dreams must not be spoiled.

"We must keep this from Eunice. Eunice must never know!"

"But how on earth is it to be kept from her?"

"You must think of a way," she repeated.

"It is quite impossible."

"Nothing is impossible. You say she wants money?"

"I say she is Desmond's wife—or widow."

Never yet had Agatha acted as other women did; it appeared she would not do so now.

"You need not go on saying it. That does not help at all. Eunice must be allowed to keep her ideals, her dreams, for a little while—at least for a little while. Andrew, don't oppose me; think of how to help me—there must be a way out. Andrew, you have guessed right. I am ill, *how* ill they don't know yet. I saw Dr. Reid yesterday. He wants me to have a man down from town. He thinks—well, there is no doubt there is some sort of growth—tumour, cancer—some sort of growth. Don't look like that; I am over sixty. Death must have some excuse, you don't expect *you* are going to live for ever, either, do you? The girl is fond of me, I believe." Agatha's voice did not falter. "She is all I have left. I am not going to have her hurt. She must not have everything to bear at once, my illness and this news. The woman must be bribed to remain quiet. I may get well again, I am almost sure to recover from this first operation. Andrew, I have not asked often for help; help me to keep this from her!"

She had shown no sign of weakness until she made this appeal. And then, of course, Andrew could not resist her. He thought it all wrong, wrong and foolish, and that the secret would be sure to come out. He thought that if Eunice knew now that the cousin to whom she was so attached had deceived her and tied himself to another woman, pride would come to her aid, pride—and Michael. Michael would console her. But what Agatha had told him overwhelmed him, made it impossible to oppose her.

"I suppose you must have your own way," he said in the end, when he had exhausted his arguments. "You always have your own way." He refrained from telling her where that way had so often led. He was so sorry for her; he had never known her ill, and this was such a dreadful illness. He yielded his judgment, promised her that so far as he and Michael were concerned the secret should be kept.

Agatha, strangely enough, was concerned only for Eunice. The news had not affected her in any other way. She felt that she had driven Desmond to this marriage, and that all that mattered was that Eunice should not know it, and his memory should not be besmirched.

"I will make any sacrifice of money. The woman you describe can surely be tempted with money? Make it clear to her that Desmond had nothing to leave, but that I will give her what I would have given him—even more, that I will give her anything in reason if she will cease to call herself Lady Grindelay, if she will keep the whole affair a secret for the present—at least for the present. If I get well——"

"Of course you will get well."

"I think I shall, I don't feel that my time has come; there is still work for me to do, and Marley. . . ." She paused there, the tears were too deep to rise into her eyes, but they were in her voice. "Not my son, but the girl he loved will inherit Marley. She will hold it in his memory; she must hear nothing, nothing of this news you have brought me."

Andrew wanted to know what surgeon or doctor was coming to see her, what arrangements had been made. Agatha did not want to talk about her illness; she made light of it.

"I dare say I shall be as well as ever in a few weeks. But it is such an inconvenient time." She would only admit to inconvenience, not to pain or danger.

Andrew was very doubtful of the wisdom of the course upon which they were to embark; he saw possibilities of complication, of blackmail, knowing that if Gabrielle were in truth Desmond's widow it was not right she should be bribed not to bear his name, not to claim her rights. But Agatha was ill, and obstinate. She reiterated that she would not have the girl's mind disturbed. Andrew yielded; Agatha, weakened like this, had become too strong for him.

"Only until I get better—at least until I get better she is not to use Desmond's name. Everything must go on as before. Eunice is to know nothing. I am sure I am right."

"When have you doubted that you are right?" he asked. But he could not argue with her.

"I am sure he would not have wished her to know. Let me do this one thing for him; let me keep his secret."

"I will do what I can. I don't think there will be any difficulty."

The conversation had to be adjourned. Visitors were announced. Neither Agatha nor Andrew was sorry that their *tête-à-tête* was broken in upon.

CHAPTER XVIII

IF she had not been Agatha, Andrew would have said that she was trying to do a wrong thing, that the woman had her rights, that it was not only Eunice whose feelings should be considered. But she *was* Agatha, and he could only carry out her instructions. He told Michael of her decision on their journey up to town on Monday morning, briefly and abruptly, but in a way that showed Michael it was past argument. Michael thought the idea of keeping the marriage a secret, concealing the whole story from Eunice, buying Gabrielle off, even more foolish than his father did, and more reprehensible. He did not think it fair to himself; then flushed, and was ashamed that he should be thinking of himself at such a time. For he heard that his father's old friend and client had an operation in front of her, that the issue was uncertain.

"I don't think at the moment she is as clear-minded as usual. She does not see the possible consequences of this concealment."

Michael could see how moved his father was, and refrained from pressing home his views. But his father would have to interview Gabrielle and bribe her to silence. He, Michael, admitted himself incapable of it.

"It is not fair to any of us," he was driven to say.

"Agatha is our client; we have to carry out her instructions," Andrew answered. "Poor Agatha!" he added.

Andrew was distressed at the prospect of Agatha's peril. Michael had nothing to do but show his filial affection, help him into his coat when the train stopped, find a cab, be assiduous in attention.

Gabrielle proved herself amenable, more amenable than could have been expected. Andrew went to her in the afternoon, and told her he had seen Lady Grindelay, told her that Desmond's mother would do nothing for her if there was any publicity or any announcement of the marriage. But that

if she would live quietly and call herself by another name, she would have a liberal allowance, a sum down—any reasonable claim would be met.

“It is true that you are entitled to Languedoc when Lord Grindelay’s death is proved, but not before. There will be delay; there is bound to be a long delay. You know your resources—what are you going to live on meanwhile? When eventually you are in possession of Languedoc, you will find it is an expense, not an income. Your pension, too. Desmond’s death will have to be proved before it is paid, the body found, or an eye-witness who saw him after death. And it will be a very inconsiderable amount, scarcely worth claiming for a woman like yourself. It is better you should be quite clear about your position. Perhaps you would like to confirm what I am telling you with your own lawyer or one of your friends?”

Whether he thought her wise or not, he fought well for his client. And when Gabrielle gave in, when she began to bargain, he knew he had achieved his object. Agatha could go through her ordeal without Eunice’s distress to deepen it. Eunice could still cherish Desmond’s memory.

Gabrielle was persuaded to move from her present quarters, where she was known as Lady Grindelay, to others where she was unknown. Andrew McKay made no stipulation as to where she was to go. It seemed of no consequence. Not the liberal allowance, but a sum down was the crux of her bargaining. Fifteen thousand pounds, she asked; but Andrew got her down to five thousand pounds. She spoke of debts, mysterious debts and expenses. Afterwards he wondered at his own blindness, that his suspicions were not more quickly aroused. For the moment he was only concerned to know that he had succeeded, that Agatha’s illness or convalescence would not be troubled, that he had carried out her wishes.

Matters were very expeditiously arranged when once the terms were agreed upon. Before the two nurses were installed at the Court, before the surgeons had made their appointments and the news of what was to be done had been broken to Eunice, Gabrielle Radlett and her child had left the Buck-

ingham Gate flat. If Andrew had had misgivings before, his last interview with Gabrielle did nothing to remove them.

"I didn't want the title," she said. "It is no use to me where I am going. I've booked to South Africa as Nurse Radlett—my old name is good enough for me. I'm off next week. I was only waiting for the cash."

"To South Africa!"

"To Cape Town. Why not? I'm a fully qualified nurse. Quite a number of us are going."

"And the child?"

They were in the office; the flat had been abandoned, all her preparations made, and the money was in her possession.

"Oh, the child!" She laughed; she had the impudence to laugh. "I wrote to Desmond's old nurse, to Biddy Malone. It was Desmond's idea that Biddy should take care of his child if he never came back. I wrote and told her so. I found someone to take the kid over. She is quite safe at Langue-doc. The old woman was glad enough to get her, I can tell you. It seems she cherishes some old grudge against Desmond's mother. She seems to think she will get even with her by keeping Desmond's child. I'm not going to interfere, they can settle it between themselves. I don't suppose I shall come back for a year or two. I might marry again—there is no knowing." Her laugh rang out again. "There will be plenty of chances. There is nothing about marrying again in that agreement you made me sign."

She had outwitted him, kept to the letter of her agreement, regained her freedom, and with more money and greater independence than she had ever had in her life. She was an adventuress, and this adventure had brought her in more than she had anticipated. She had no love for Desmond, for the difficult young man she had entrapped. She was glad to be rid of him and his child. And at such a good price.

Lady Grindelay heard nothing of what had occurred, nothing of what had become of the adventuress who called herself her son's wife, nor of the child who was doubtfully his. She relied upon Andrew; once Andrew had undertaken to carry out her wishes she refused to give the matter any further

thought. Agatha was now in the hands of doctors and nurses. Andrew could not break in upon them to tell her of his doubts or misgivings. He was glad of the respite, not proud of the way he had conducted the negotiations. There was something about Gabrielle Radlett when he saw her for the last time in his office, after the agreement had been signed, that excited his tardy suspicion. Now, when it was too late, he put detectives on her trail, set himself and them the task of piecing out her history, discovering everything that should have been discovered before that five thousand pounds had been thrown away.

Gabrielle Radlett had no claim to call herself Lady Grindelay. She was already married when she went through that ceremony with Desmond. The story those detectives unravelled was commonplace enough; it lay quite on the surface. She was known to the police, known at Scotland Yard. Her husband was even now at Dartmoor, serving his time for an offence for which they had been tried together, of which she had been acquitted, many years ago. His time was nearly up. It was not likely he would have enough money when he came out to follow her to South Africa. She had no fancy for a domestic life with ex-convict No. 3734.

Andrew learnt all this from Detective Grose of Scotland Yard. Everything about her was on record; he need only have inquired earlier and in the right quarter.

At fourteen she was sent to a penitentiary for petty pilfering in the common lodging-house where she had been employed as a general servant. Yet she was not a victim of conditions, but of character. At the end of her detention a benevolent old lady took a fancy to her, and paid for her education and training as a hospital nurse. She could have retrieved her past; she had capacity, even talent. But before the end of her training she was in the thick of an intrigue with one of the young hospital doctors. He abandoned her, and to conceal her condition she went through a hasty marriage with a sympathetic and plausible scoundrel, who saw in her profession a means he could use in his own more nefarious one. They soon began to understand each other. The sen-

tence he was serving was for forgery and attempted blackmail. Gabrielle had nursed the man whose will was forged. She had been one of the witnesses, but at the trial it was said she was acting under her husband's influence. Her youth and good looks appealed to the jury, and, as has been seen, she was acquitted. She resumed her profession; she had always her attractive manner to secure the suffrages and recommendations of doctors. Lord Grindelay was not the only patient who had had to rue her ministrations.

This was, in brief, the story Inspector Grose had to tell. He was very terse and direct. The only detail Andrew wanted was the date of the marriage, and the proof that her first husband was still alive, and neither was difficult to obtain. Andrew was very much out of conceit with himself for having become suspicious so late.

"Who could dream she was risking a prosecution for bigamy?"

"Well, you know, we are not criminal lawyers," Michael said to him consolingly.

"I feel I was criminally negligent over those five thousand pounds," Andrew replied ruefully. "Of course, she was delighted to find we wanted the matter hushed up."

Still, there were compensations for his over-haste and lack of caution. Desmond was not married; he had left no heir. There was no one who was entitled to call herself "Lady Grindelay" or disturb Eunice's mind. He knew Agatha would think five thousand pounds not too much to pay for the knowledge.

It was some time before he was able to see Agatha, but he wrote her a brief letter that everything had been done as she wished, and that the marriage of which she had been informed had not proved a legal one. "There will be no further trouble from that quarter," he added, knowing no better.

Before Andrew's letter reached Marley, however, great news came to hand, news that made its contents comparatively unimportant, although later the importance became more significant. But that was not yet.

Michael came late to the office the very day the letter was dispatched, with a pale and agitated face.

"Have you heard what they are crying in the streets? Roberts has marched into Pretoria, finding and releasing a large number of prisoners who had long been given up as dead. There are names amongst them——" Their eyes met, his father caught his excitement, answering it.

"Not Desmond's? Not Lord Grindelay's?"

"They say so. 'No Surrender Grindelay amongst the prisoners' is on all the placards. I am just going round to the War Office. I only called in to tell you."

"Good God! Good God! If it should be true!"

"I think it must be true. Here's the paper. It is circumstantial enough. I can be down at Marley before the evening papers get there. You don't mind if I don't come back here?"

"You won't be able to see Agatha."

"I can see Eunice. I should like to tell her myself. I was so often the bearer of bad tidings——" He halted in his speech, but it was easy to see what he had suffered in carrying it. "I should like to tell her this myself," he said. "Do you mind if I go?"

"Of course not." His father understood, showed his sympathy by his silence. "You can call at the War Office, and still be in time to catch the five o'clock train. Perhaps you'll be able to let me know?"

"It will be too late to come back if I am to catch the five o'clock."

"Be careful what you telegraph. You know what they have been going through."

"They are sure to have arranged that no telegrams are taken up to the sick room. I shall simply wire for the brougham to meet me."

"They'll guess. The girl never believed he was dead. Agatha told me so."

"I know," Michael added simply. "She told me so herself."

Neither of them spoke of Desmond's wife, who was no wife.

The lesser news was swallowed up by the greater. Desmond was alive.

The War Office confirmed the news that was in the papers. Prisoners of war had been released by Roberts in Pretoria, and Lord Grindelay was amongst them. There were no details to hand as yet, only the bare fact.

Michael caught the five o'clock train. He would be in Marley before the news. His telegram was a little more explicit than his father had advised, and it was sent to Eunice.

"Arriving six-fifty, bringing news."

He wanted to see her at the station when he got to the end of his journey; he wanted to see her face brighten when he told her, although the brightening would not be for him. He had suffered in seeing her suffer, in his helplessness to help her. If he had thought of what she might say or do should she ever hear of Gabrielle Radlett, he put it on one side now. She might never hear of that, she would never hear of it from him. He was the bearer of good news.

Eunice had been through a strenuous time, months of anxiety and the crushing sorrow from which she had emerged, to hope still. Then the shock of Agatha's illness; the anxious hours when the surgeons were with her, days and nights of nursing.

At the station Michael told her nothing and she was afraid to question him. Now in the darkness of the evening they were in the brougham; the two lamps cast their light only on the road, and she heard the regular trot of the horses' feet.

"Desmond is alive," Michael said then, briefly, curtly. "You were quite right. Roberts found him in Pretoria, among the wounded."

"Desmond is alive!" When Michael said that, her heart gave a great bound, then was in her throat, impeding words: "Desmond is alive!"

The carriage rolled on. She could not speak; she knew she must thank Michael for coming to tell her. She put out her hand for his, and he held it. Then, after a minute, she burst out crying. He had not thought she would take it like

this. His arm went round her, his awkward, unaccustomed arm. Now she was crying on his shoulder, saying: "Oh, Michael!" and "Is it really true?" "Oh, Michael! I am not crying; only so glad and—and grateful." "Oh, Michael! I thought it must happen. I've only been half alive without Desmond, I knew he couldn't be dead."

Michael, with his arm about her, set his teeth and bore it. He had come down to tell her, wanting to see the grief vanish from her face, to see it bloom again in smiles and happiness, to hear her say "Oh, Michael!" and thank him for bringing the news. He had not thought of what would happen then, or afterwards; only that he would take her the good news. Now she was crying on his shoulder, and for the first time his arms were round her. Perhaps he had not known how much he loved her until he held her in his arms. There was a moment in which he wished the marriage had been legal, a moment in which he wanted her to know that Desmond had not been true to her, a savage, unworthy moment, succeeded by a great and overwhelming tenderness.

"There is no doubt at all about it. You must not cry," he said stiffly.

"I'm not crying; only it's so wonderful!"

"You never believed he was dead."

"Not in my dreams, nor in the bottom of my heart. But sometimes—often—I thought it true. I could never bear it when I thought it was true; I used to feel sick and faint. I wouldn't believe it."

"You care for him so-much?"

"It's always been Desmond and me—me and Desmond—ever since we were children—always."

She recovered herself very soon, left off crying, sat up. She forgot Michael's arms had been round her, that she had sobbed on his shoulder. She forgot Michael McKay loved her, and had told her so. Michael never forgot, but Eunice did. He wore an eyeglass, used legal phrases. It seemed of little consequence at any time that he loved her, of none now that Desmond was alive. She began to talk to him soon of

what her aunt would say, of how long it would be before the doctors would let her be told. Michael used the jejune phrase, he said :

“Joy does not kill.”

Perhaps he had had a wild idea that theirs was only cousinly love, that it had weakened in Desmond's absence. She had been very kind to him, sweet and gentle, in London, and ever since Desmond went away. He may have had hope ; hope is so hard to kill. But when he dined with her that night, seeing her radiant face, he had again no hope except that Desmond should prove worthy of her, that her happiness might be completed. For all his staidness, there was a wild pain at his heart. He stifled it by reiterating to himself that all he wanted was her happiness.

“He will come home now? After being wounded and imprisoned, and wounded again, they will be sure to send him home. How proud we shall be of him ! ‘No Surrender Grin-delay !’ That's what the men called him, you told me that.”

He had tried to comfort her with it when first they heard Desmond was missing, when he and everybody but the girl who loved him thought that Desmond was dead.

“He might be on his way home now.”

She was almost awed with the greatness of that possibility. In the face she turned to him for confirmation he saw, by the heightened colour and the shining eyes, her new glad outlook on the world. It was all for Desmond. He tried to meet her spirit, but as the dinner went on, when all the household had been told and were rejoicing with her—the old butler with his filled eyes, the young footman who had permission to go down and tell the village—Michael played his part so indifferently well that when he went away, for he would not stay the night although she pressed him, she found her great joy a little dimmed, found herself a little sorry for him, vaguely, and with that comforting sense that he never could have really hoped for anything different. It had always been she and Desmond—just she and Desmond.

Perhaps she thought him a little unfair, a little ungener-

ous, to let her be sorry for him to-night, to cloud her wonderful happiness. Yet such a lover had he become, this prig of a Michael, with his gold-rimmed eyeglass, in his stiffness and want of humour, that before he got back to town he had forgotten himself again; he was only thinking she must never hear now of Gabrielle Radlett, that they must shield her—he and his father and Lady Grindelay. He dared not think how she would feel if she knew that there was another woman who had a claim upon Desmond—a child!

CHAPTER XIX

THE doctors would not allow Lady Grindelay to be told for a day or two; but they, too, agreed that joy did not kill. Eunice was instructed to break it gently, to speak of hope, not certainty.

But Eunice's face broke the news before she did. She could not constrain her face, and Lady Grindelay's intelligence had not yet suffered in her illness.

"You look very gay this morning," she said to the girl.

"That is because you are getting well," Eunice answered quickly.

"Turn your face to the light." She lay still for a few minutes, her eyes on the girl's face. Eunice turned away from the scrutiny, but there was a warm, wild rose flush in her cheek, and a light in her eyes.

"If it were not so impossible . . ." Lady Grindelay began.

"Oh, auntie, why do you look at me like that?" she said agitatedly. And then added absurdly: "They said I must not tell you."

"It is true, then—the impossible is true?" The invalid's face flushed, her breath came quickly.

"You've guessed?"

"Your face is illuminated, what else could light it so? My son was dead and is alive! My son!"

The red flushed her old cheeks, the pulses beat dangerously.

Nurse came running with smelling bottle and brandy, speaking in the manner of her kind to Eunice, for all her sympathy, and though her uniformed heart went out to them both:

"You oughtn't to have told her like that. I'm surprised at your knowing no better than to tell her before she was up or had anything done to her."

"I couldn't help it; she guessed," sobbed Eunice. There were tears in the nurse's eyes for all her indignation.

"Upsetting you like this, and before you've had your breakfast." She was inconsistent, it is difficult even for a hospital nurse to be consistent on such an occasion, "I know, milady; we all heard it last night, and there was great rejoicing in the household. Miss Eunice sent word up and down."

"Take it away, I don't want brandy or smelling salts because my son—is alive." The last words were faint, whispered.

She had to take the stimulant, her heart nearly failed. As always, she overrated her strength. But it was because the memory of Gabrielle Radlett came to her suddenly, weakening her, that she lay back, pale, with her heart failing. It was only physical weakness; her will was as strong as ever. Even before she read Andrew's letter she had made up her mind Eunice must not be told—not now, certainly. Something must be contrived. Of course, after she read Andrew's letter, which she was able to do in another hour or two, she knew there was no "not yet" about it. Eunice need never know, must never know, unless perhaps some day, in the intimacy of married life, Desmond himself might tell her.

"The intimacy of married life!"

Agatha lay and thought about that in the weary hours of her convalescence. "*The intimacy of married life.*"

Memories intruded upon her, flushing her thin old cheeks. She thought that if Lord Grindelay had told her nothing, had kept his secrets, she would have suffered less. But Desmond was different, he had only this one secret. The girl must never turn from and resent him. His mother could not bear to think of it; the secret must be kept.

And then she lay and built her air castles. They would live here at Marley; she would see him every day. He would be grateful to her for having kept his secret, for everything she was going to do for them. He would forgive her for not being demonstrative, come to some understanding of her love for him; she was an old woman now, and could not change her ways. There would be nothing of his father left in him after the purification of the war. He would be all Wanstead. So many of them had served their country. Then she thought

she would ask him to give up his tarnished title, and call himself Wanstead. She would give him so much, surely she might ask that.

She regained strength slowly, spending the next few weeks listening whilst Eunice chattered about Desmond, adding her own voice sometimes, arranging what was to happen when Desmond came home. There was much to be thought of now that Desmond was coming home. Lady Grindelay had neglected Marley a little of late. There were more new cottages needed. Desmond must superintend the new cottages.

"He will find plenty to interest him."

Eunice never doubted it.

Andrew came down to see her as soon as he was allowed. Michael would not accompany him; he could not trust himself with Eunice again just yet. Andrew went up to Agatha's bedroom, the big room with the great bow-window looking over the gardens to the green woods, the room with its four-poster bedstead and antiquated walnut furniture. It moved Andrew to see Agatha on the sofa, so unlike herself in her lace cap and wrapper. But he controlled himself well.

"I didn't die, you see," she began.

"The world would have been an empty place for me if you had." His voice was husky.

He held her hand a moment longer than was necessary, and it seemed to rest in his.

"I've given you a great deal of trouble one way and another," she said.

"I've never grudged any trouble I took for you."

"I know."

Then there was another moment in which neither of them spoke. There was much to say, some of it that would never be spoken.

Perhaps it was not only of her son she was thinking in that moment of silence. But when Andrew relinquished her hand and sat down beside her, when they were both themselves again, she spoke of Desmond.

"It seems incredible even now. I am glad I got better.

I have not been a very good mother to him, Andrew. But there is time still. . . .”

“No woman is fit to bring up a boy. She can’t make him, and she may mar him.”

“I sent him out to the war.”

“You’ve been eating your heart out ever since. I’ve little doubt it was that brought on your illness.”

“Perhaps.”

“Now he’ll be coming home, thinking of his cousin again. Have you told her about the woman?”

“Not yet.”

“She will have to know some time; better get it over.”

“Andrew, I’ve been thinking——”

“A thing no woman should be allowed to do. She always thinks wrong, generally illogically.”

He wanted to rouse her to argument, he could hardly bear to see her lying like this.

“Sometimes I wish I had been more like other women,” she said, a little sadly.

He put his hand on hers again.

“I shouldn’t wish that,” he said, “if I were you. I like to think of you as you are.”

“Andrew,” she said again, after a pause. “Nobody *need* ever know of this—this abortive marriage.”

“Not if you don’t wish it, not if you think it best.”

“I don’t want Eunice to be told. I will explain why—I will try and explain why. But first tell me all you found out—everything there is to know.”

He told her a great deal, not everything, but a great deal. They were early days, and she was still weak. He gave her an outline of Gabrielle Radlett’s history. But he did not tell her then that Gabrielle had gone out to South Africa to nurse the wounded or amuse herself. And he did not tell her, not then, that she had sent Desmond’s child—if the child were Desmond’s—to Languedoc. He thought he should be able to get it away from there before Desmond came home. They would, of course, provide for it suitably; some good woman could be found to rear it. When Agatha was quite

herself again it would be time to remind her that they had not quite done with Gabrielle Radlett or the consequence of Desmond's folly.

Now he agreed with Agatha that the whole thing should be hushed up. Desmond was not the first young man to fall into such a trap. The trap had opened; he had escaped. There was no need to take the world into their confidence, to show how ingenuous the boy had been and easily netted. The lawyer thought that nobody need be told but Eunice. But Agatha said that Eunice should be the last person who must hear.

Eunice came in whilst Andrew and Agatha were talking. He saw how her beauty had bloomed, and although he wanted her for Michael, he knew how suitable would be a marriage between her and her cousin. They would hold Marley in common, there was Wanstead blood in both of them; the old place would stay in the old family. As for Michael, Michael must get over it. But when he said that, he felt doubtful and saddened. Had he ever forgotten, although he had taken a wife to himself? Was there anything in his life as strong as his feeling for the mistress of Marley? He knew there was not. Michael himself would not stand between him and any service he could render her.

The weeks passed. Lady Grindelay rid herself of the nurses, went about the house again and into the garden, wrapped in her shawl; went again to the village, to the school and the model laundry, resuming her old place.

She had been missed. Everyone learned her value whilst she was away from them, lying up at the big house between life and death. If her words had been few, her hand had been open. They welcomed her back warmly, and she was touched by their welcome. Now she had a new understanding of childhood's magnified small troubles, every child was some woman's son or daughter, the tragedy of motherhood hung over everything.

Little Marley was proud of "No Surrender Grindelay," and Great Marley was proud of him and the many men they had sent to the war. There would be a great reception for

them when they came home. Already it was being planned. Sir John Campden came from his own desolate home to tell her how glad they were that she, too, was not bereaved. He had lost both his sons, but to Agatha he only spoke of Desmond's bravery.

"He was always a fine lad. Cedric and Jeff were devoted to him, my poor wife too. When he comes back he must come to us sometimes, though the house is dull now—empty."

His voice faltered, but he had not come to Agatha to speak of his own troubles. He had come to tell her he rejoiced in her joy, that the whole county rejoiced with her, was proud with her. Perhaps he remembered he had wanted Agatha at Denham, that she might have been the mother of those dead boys of his. But he was glad that her own son was alive, truly glad.

Eunice's heart swelled when men, and women too, talked of Desmond. She went with Lady Grindelay everywhere, attending on her, solicitous for her, but listening always, alert to the last word.

"'No Surrender Grindelay!' 'Surrender be damned!' he said to them Boers, good luck to him!"

"'Come on!' sez he. It's an Englishman I am, a Marley man. Surrender be damned!"

Such phrases were repeated again and again, with comments and local pride. Eunice was never tired of hearing them; always her heart swelled, often her eyes filled. But she had long known that Desmond was brave, that he would be a hero. It was not so new to her to be proud of Desmond as it was to the others.

From South Africa the news came slowly; there was an accumulation, and it filtered through in dribblets. Lord Roberts had marched into Pretoria with flying colours, had released the prisoners. The war was over, so it was supposed. We know now that it was nothing like over, that De Wet had to be reckoned with, and his picked band of sharpshooters; that if the war were over the country was still in arms. These were the days immediately before the block-houses and the two years' guerilla warfare. It was only the first part of the

campaign that was over; we had still to conquer the so-often-conquered country; two more long blood-stained years had yet to pass.

A cable was sent to Desmond as soon as communication could be established, telling him of his mother's illness, asking him to return as soon as possible. The reply was from headquarters. Lord Grindelay was ill, not recovered from his wounds, had fever, was in hospital, unable to travel.

Before they had time to be alarmed his own letter came. In the sun of the sunken garden, where the roses filled the air with sweetness, throwing out largesses of scent, and the bees came droning for honey, Agatha and the girl read it together. To them it seemed as if now it would always be summer:

"DEAR MOTHER,—The post is just going. I hear we were all reported dead. I'm sending you a line to tell you I'm all right. I've had some fever, been pretty bad. I hope you have not been anxious about me. I can't help thinking it would have been better if I had not pulled through. I dare say by this time you know why I think so."

The letter was blurred and ill-written, ending abruptly.

The intelligent orderly who sent it had, however, added a line or two on his own account:

"Hoping you won't think it a liberty, I let you know your son has had a bad bout of fever as well as his wounds, and can't use his arm very well, and is down on his luck. But he will come all right, as his constitution is sound, and we shall cheer him up, for we are proud of him, and hope to serve under him again."

* * * * *

Over the grass and into the rose garden came Andrew and Michael McKay, two black-coated town figures, never more eagerly welcomed.

"He is ill, Andrew."

"Michael, Desmond has written, but he is ill."

They both spoke at once, and Lady Grindelay held out the letter. But the men had come down that afternoon, fully informed, and with a proposition that they opened almost as soon as they came in sight.

"I'm going out to him."

"What do you think of Michael fetching him?"

Eunice was immediately all excited question and answer. But Andrew went on speaking to Agatha, and let Michael attend to her.

"We hear he is ill and unable to travel. It is Michael's idea to go out and bring him back. If you agree he can catch Saturday's boat. The long vacation is coming on, I can spare him easily," he added.

"Another sacrifice you are making for me!" Agatha said.

"Not at all; it is no sacrifice. He wants to go; the change will do him good."

Michael and Eunice were talking together, apart from the others.

"It is a good thing in every way that Michael should go out; there are things one cannot write."

Andrew began to explain himself more fully, but Agatha caught his meaning quickly.

"That woman?"

"She is out there—nursing."

"Not in Pretoria?"

"No; not in Pretoria, so far as we know. The nurses go to Cape Town in the first instance, then they are drafted to Pretoria or one or the other of the field hospitals. We've been making inquiries, and that is what we've ascertained. We don't want to take any risks."

"You think she may seek him out?"

"It is not unlikely. Michael would stand between her and any fresh influence she sought to establish."

"If I were stronger, surer of myself——"

"Of course, if you had not been ill, you would have been there before now. Numbers have gone, some to help, many to be in the way, some because all the best of our young men are there——"

"That was probably her motive," she interrupted.

"Possibly. As I said, we don't want to take any risks. He will hear all we have learned; of your illness too, and your desire that he should return as quickly as possible. He may not be well enough to travel alone. Michael is very able—gentle, too." He urged his point, but it needed little urging.

"It is hard on Michael," she suggested doubtfully.

Now they remembered their talks about Michael and Eunice.

"We are not doomed to be successful in our love affairs, Michael and I." He spoke with a wry smile. "But we are happy in serving."

"You have a genius for friendship, both of you," she answered, with emotion.

It was decided that Michael should go on Saturday. All the evening they calculated times and distances. They agreed that they ought to be back, Michael and the invalid, in seven weeks. Eunice and Michael said seven, though the elders were a little doubtful. In any case Michael would be lavish in cables, letting Desmond know at once that he was on the way to him.

"He might come as far as Cape Town to meet you; that would save three or four days," Eunice said hopefully.

Details were happily discussed, many messages entrusted; one that was never put into words.

"Tell him, tell him—he is to come back quickly."

That was all Eunice's special instructions, given with glowing eyes and flushing cheeks.

"I understand," Michael answered in a low voice, adding, "He shall understand."

He covered up his own hurt. It was true, as Lady Grindelay had said to his father, they had a genius for friendship. What more can a man ask than to bring happiness to the girl he loves, be able to help her? Since it was Desmond she needed for her happiness, he would bring Desmond to her, tell him of his freedom, make the way easy for him.

CHAPTER XX

DESMOND was not amongst the first batch of prisoners whom Lord Roberts, marching into Pretoria with colours flying after all those desperate days of disaster and death, had found and released. Neither was he with those who, indifferently well cared for, lay under the shadow of the church where Kruger had officiated week by week, preaching his distorted patriotism and the gospel of peace that had bespattered two continents with blood. It was at Waterval young Lord Grindelay was discovered. The Boers, retreating in disorder before our advancing army, had these last prisoners with them, prisoners held, perhaps, for ransom or reprisal, many of them dead or dying of fever or gangrened wounds, faint with famine or parched with thirst. They had sad stories to tell of outrage and insult, neglect or ill-treatment.

But Desmond had no story to tell; he was long past talk, unrecognisable for many days, until, in the quickly improvised field hospital, one of his own men saw him, called others to confirm, and finally spread the incredible news. He came very slowly to the knowledge of his rescue. One arm had been shattered by rifle shot; he had more wounds than, according to the doctors, could be shown by any other living tribute to the accuracy of Boer marksmanship. He had lain for many days in the bosom of King Death, looking into his cold eyes, feeling his hypnotic breath, without the strength to struggle, or perhaps the desire. He was so weak he wished that Death would clasp him closer. But the doctors wrested him away against his will. Out of reach of that hypnotic breath he became only conscious of pain, physical and mental pain, of hopelessness. His fever had been haunted by the swaying of boughs, visions of moss-clad roots of trees in the cool woods of Marley, by mirage of the gleaming river in green leafy distances. When his intervals of consciousness came now, there were no green woods, but canvas walls, the dry dust of the sun-baked veldt blowing through the flapping door, and

near him, so near that he could have touched her, Gabrielle—Gabrielle Radlett!—she who stood for ever between him and the woods. It seemed impossible that she should be here, incredible.

It was not delirium, not another fevered dream, and presently he understood she was speaking to him.

“You did not expect to see me here, did you? Can’t you make an effort—pull yourself together?”

“You have come out to nurse me?” he said faintly.

She laughed; he hated that light laugh, and shut his eyes.

“Don’t you flatter yourself it was only for you I came. You were supposed to be dead, you know.”

“I don’t understand,” he said feebly. He wished she would go away.

“There’s nothing to understand. I’m not here as Lady Grindelay; I am here as Nurse Radlett. You mustn’t give me away.”

“Give you away?”

She would not explain, nor let him talk just then; she was quite a good nurse, and recognised he was not yet in a condition even for listening. She was hot in pursuit of a quarry even more promising than he had been, when, hearing of his resurrection, she had hurried to his side. She wanted secrecy from him, and was annoyed to find him in no condition for argument or compromise. She reckoned on his not having yet heard from England; on his being in ignorance of that which by now she knew the McKays had discovered. She had no time to waste. The new quarry lay in Cape Town at the mercy of her ministrations. But she had many rivals, ladies fair and ladies frail, and she wanted to get back to her post.

“I wish now I had thought of some other name,” she said reflectively, as she lifted Desmond’s head and put the cup to his lips.

She meant that in such case she need not have come to Waterval; Lord Grindelay would not have known she was in South Africa, could not have interfered with her. With the strange inconsistency of her kind, she had no mind even now to tell him that he had no right of interference.

"You lie still and get well, that's what you've got to do," was her answer to the inquiry in his fever-dulled eyes.

"Do they know?" he asked.

She lied convincingly.

"Nobody knows, nobody has got to know—mind that."

It seemed to satisfy him, and afterwards he rested fitfully.

Freedom had come to her since she had been out here. Convict No. 3734 was dead. But young Lord Grindelay had not known of his existence. She had to make her plans before he was better informed. She had to vamp up for him some tale of irregularity in the ceremony they had gone through. There would be no difficulty in making him repeat it. She knew the nature of his chivalry, and how to play on it. The child was a great asset. But she had much bigger game on hand, ever so much bigger. She was clever and daring; the Earl of Montessor weak, dull witted and amenable. Without the chain of convict No. 3734 dragging behind her there was nothing of which she did not feel capable. But she would keep this other string to her bow as long as possible. She had got that five thousand pounds so easily that it seemed to her there must be much more behind where it came from. There was money to be made, too, from the earl, even if he broke away. She wanted all she could get. She was typical of the class of women, not voluptuaries, but mere traders, who grow greedier as they grow older.

"I've got to get back in a few days," she told Desmond. "You and me have got to have some talk. But not yet, not until you are better, buck along up, now."

There was something about which he wanted to ask her, but he had forgotten what it was. In semi-delirium it came back to him, and that night he caught at her skirt to detain her, only to find it was another skirt he held; then again he relapsed into unconsciousness. Doctors and nurses came and went in that hasty but admirably organised field hospital, Nurse Radlett evadingly among them.

Letters from home were on the way, delayed here and there by the exigencies of the war. The first thing that came was Michael McKay's cable.

Michael was coming out to him. He wondered why, not wanting Michael, nor anybody, only to be allowed to be still, to drift out through the swaying door. His wife was here somewhere. He should be grateful, but he shrank from her weakly, flesh and spirit shrank. He had a dim, sick man's insight sometimes into Gabrielle's mind; she said strange things—strange, impatient things. The intermittent fever came and went. In delirium Eunice would float in sometimes, put a cool hand on his forehead, say "Yes" or "No" soothingly in response to his gabble, to the disjointed words he poured out, in which he tried to tell her how it all came about, how little it meant, that he had never cared about anybody but her. He called out her name, then woke, sweating and afraid lest Gabrielle should have heard.

Gabrielle was tired of it, bored with the field hospital, with Desmond. She wanted to go back to the variety and colour of Cape Town, to the languishing earl. But after Michael's cable came she dared not stir. She had three weeks before her, three weeks in which to make her choice. She was distracted with it, like the dog with the big piece of meat in its mouth and the reflection in the water. She could make Desmond marry her again, she had no doubt about that, if she could concoct a story for him before Michael got in with his. But Desmond was surrounded by his friends and comrades, too ill to assert himself; he was under their protection. And she had just such another young fool in tow. She was undecided, fearing to miss the substance for the shadow, delaying Desmond's recovery by the turmoil in which she kept his mind. For in his weakness it but reflected her own. And he did not know what she wanted of him; only that she stood between him and Marley. He improved very slowly, almost imperceptibly; he seemed to make no effort.

"There must be something on his mind," said one doctor to another.

"We must get him away as soon as possible."

They tried the experiment of telling him that he was going to be sent home, and were astounded when he answered agitatedly in that weak voice of his that he could not go, that

he wished to stay where he was. His fever flamed higher after that; he responded less well to their drugs or their efforts. In the end the offices of the army chaplain were invoked. And the army chaplain wasted few words. It did not seem to him to be the time for them, nor for texts, other than one he did not preach, but proved.

"You've something on your mind, Grindelay; you are not making the progress they expect of you. Is there anything I can do for you—that you'd like to tell me? We're proud of you, but you're disappointing us."

"I don't see there is anything to be proud of," Desmond answered wearily. "I made a mess of an expedition, led my men into a trap, cost a lot of good fellows their lives."

"Is that what's troubling you?"

He was without fever at the moment, but also without interest or energy. This was when he wrote that letter to his mother. His wife had not been near him for days now; he did not know what had become of her. But he knew all about what he had done. Married a woman he could never take home, forfeited home, Eunice, all for nothing, for a woman who mocked him and would not answer a question. Michael was coming out to him, perhaps to tell him that his place was filled. Young Lord Grindelay turned his face to the wall; he did not wish to get better or well.

"Is it the loss of your men that is troubling you?"

"No."

"What is it, then?" the parson repeated gently. "If you cared to tell me I might be able to help."

"No one can help me," Desmond said weakly, with his face to the wall.

"Home troubles?"

"Nothing I've not brought upon myself." He moved restlessly in the bed. "Don't bother about me."

"You are disappointing the doctors, who have taken endless trouble over you," the parson persisted.

"I wish they hadn't! I wish they'd let me die!"

"It has been almost a miracle that your arm is saved. You are not grateful for that?"

“No!” shortly.

“Well, you ought to be, that’s all I can say.”

The parson was rebuffed, a little offended, perhaps, getting up as if to go away, then changing his mind and coming back to the side of the bed. “You’ve been kept secluded, with this screen round you. They are taking it away presently. Look round you then, *think*. You have some trouble, some private trouble. I see that, and I wish I could have been of use to you, but you won’t let me try. I’m going to say one thing more to you”—Desmond’s face was still averted—“whether you wish to hear it or not. There is only one way to lighten a heavy heart; take another’s burden on it. Blend the two with sympathy; you’ll find the sympathy acts like yeast. Well, good-bye. I see you don’t want to talk to me. When you do, you will find friends around you. They will preach to you better than I can.”

He spoke to dull ears. Desmond could think of nothing but his wife. For days now she had not been near him. But she had impressed secrecy upon him, spoken of an irregularity in their marriage, hinted at things to be set right. He was so much less a man than he had been, by reason of his pain and wounds and recurrent fever, that he could not face his future with her at all. Michael was coming, and he would have to speak of her to Michael, hear what happy news he brought. Never in the worst agony of pain and fever had he longed for water as he longed now for Marley or for Eunice, even sometimes for his mother. He had thrown everything away.

Yet something of the Rev. Alan Hodder’s words must have penetrated. For the day after his visit, the screen removed and all the tented bareness of the room revealed, Desmond found himself no longer with his face to the wall, but lying on his back, seeing many pallet beds and strange, unshaven faces. Before he had time for recognition one from the bed beside his own called out:

“Hullo!”

This was not a man, but a boy, quite a young boy he seemed, and one strangely familiar.

"Hullo!" Desmond answered vaguely.

"Getting better?"

The question brought no ready answer. Desmond stared at his interlocutor, and his interlocutor gazed back at him. Neither of them moved; one of them because he could not, the other because he had not the energy or the desire.

"I don't believe you know who I am."

"I am not sure; we're all ghosts, I suppose. Did I know you when we were alive?"

"I'm Thwaites."

"Thwaites?"

"Jimmy Thwaites!"

"Jimmy Thwaites?"

"Eton. You can't have forgotten. I say, you must have been thundering bad. This is the first time anyone has seen you since you were brought here. There was a screen round your bed. But you are better, and that's good news. Isn't it rum that there are three of us here. Three O.E.'s!"

"You're Bunny!" Desmond exclaimed.

"Bunny I am, what's left of him!"

It was the same old Bunny, his little pal from Eton, whimsical, with his gutta-percha face and wide smile.

"You've come to it now. And 'Paddy from Cork' you were. But now you're 'No Surrender Grindelay!' and there'll be medals for your breast, my bhoys!"

He imitated the brogue as he had often done before, and some of his boyhood, of which this young Bunny had been a part, came dully back to Desmond.

"You haven't lost your impudence," he answered.

He had said they were all ghosts, and it was but the ghost of a smile he had for the imitation. But even that cleared his mind and his sight a little.

"Same old Bunny! Who are the others, who else is here?" he asked.

"We're the others. Elphinstone is here."

"Elphinstone!"

The conversation ended then. An orderly came round. Desmond had to be fed, his restored arm was still useless.

When he wanted to talk again, but that was not until a few hours later, Bunny was asleep. He himself slept better that night, better than he had done since they brought him here. And in the morning he seemed to have a new interest in life.

"Bunny—it is you, isn't it, I didn't dream it?"

"The top of the morning to you. I've been wondering how much longer you were going to lie there like a log. I'd have thrown a wet sponge at you, but there isn't one handy. I haven't been called Bunny since I left Eton. They called me 'The Kid' at Sandhurst."

"You bounded, I suppose." The old jokes came back to him, the old slang.

"Wrong again, it was because I was so expert at a bottle. I say, hasn't this been a rag? We've busted their old commandoes sky high. I wouldn't have missed it for anything. I only wish I wasn't going home. There's lots of fun to come."

"Why should we go home? We can get leave to rejoin, I suppose?"

"You can, lucky beast." But it was quite a cheerful grumble.

"Well, why can't you?"

Bunny Thwaites looked healthy, although smaller than ever, shrunken a little. But what they had all gone through at the hands of the Boers would account for that. His blue eyes were still alight with fun, and his boyish spirit shone in them.

"Why can't I? Well, for one thing, because they've shot off both my legs, bad cess to them!"

Desmond went quite white, Jimmy's sharp eyes saw it. There was no one near either of them.

"You're not going to faint away like a bally girl, are you?" he asked anxiously. "I shouldn't do that if I were you. It's the fortune of war."

Desmond could not answer. Bunny, little Bunny Thwaites, the readiest and most alert of fags, and such a fives player!

"I'll be about on my stumps before you know where you are. What's a leg or two?"

He was brave—too brave. When he saw tears rolling down Desmond's cheeks, and that he was trying to wipe them away or hide them with his red flannel sleeve, his own voice faltered. But he went on after a minute.

"What's a leg or two, Paddy? Don't take on. I'll get about with cork ones, get a bigger pair than I ever had of my own, and look quite a fine fellow. Don't howl, Paddy."

"I'm not howling."

"I'm only half as badly off as Elphinstone."

"Who is talking about me?" came a cheery voice from the other corner of the ward, two beds away from them.

Jimmy answered; Desmond could not command his voice.

"Paddy from Cork; he's come to life again."

"What? 'No Surrender Grindelay?' That's good news.

"'Surrender be damned!' was what he said. You remember what a foul-mouthed brute he always was."

"Glad you've come round, Grindelay. You've been pretty bad, haven't you? We've all been anxious about you."

"It's awfully good of you."

Elphinstone had been a very big pot at Eton; captain of the Pop, captain of the boats; in the Sixth. Desmond turned his head away from poor Jimmy and toward Elphinstone as he spoke. He had hardly recovered from the shock of hearing about Jimmy's legs; he could not bear to look at the bed.

There was little to be seen of Elphinstone but bandages.

"You've been knocked about, too?" he said.

"Shut up!" broke in Bunny shortly, quickly, under his breath.

"Why should he shut up? I wish all you fellows wouldn't think I'm sensitive." The clear voice cut across to where they lay through the odour of iodoform and disinfectants. "I'm blind, Grindelay! I can hear you talk, but I can't see you."

"Oh, my God! Not blind—not for always, Elphie?"

"Dear old boy! Don't be too sorry for me. There's lots worse off than I am. You'd be surprised how keenly I hear, better every day. I shall be able to row, you know, and lots of

other things. There is nothing to prevent my riding. Poor old Bunny, now—the poor Kid!”

Desmond, all his limbs intact, even if for the moment his right arm was stiff and useless, heard later on that Elphinstone had had the top of his head blown off by a shell, and both his eyes with it. Elphinstone! They had walked down the High together, arm in arm, in their silk hats and exclusive waistcoats. They had cheered their House at football matches. It was Elphinstone who had got him into the boat.

Before Elphinstone and Jimmy and their courage, the lost woods of Marley grew faint and blurred, and Desmond became ashamed of his self-absorption. There came an *esprit de corps* into that canvas tent, with its row of pallet beds—something of the old school spirit, when they knew better than to cry out when they were hurt. There were other men there, eleven altogether; some from other big schools, one or two from the colonies. Jimmy said they ought to get up a cricket match, and suggested himself as “stumper.”

But Elphinstone was the life and soul of the ward. He chaffed the nurses and even flirted with them. Notwithstanding that he must always wear a bandage because of his disfigurement, and that so little time ago he was the handsomest of lads, he talked as if little was altered. It was pitiful, but it was fine. He was for ever testing his increasing sharpness of hearing, “swaggering it,” Bunny said. Bunny and all of them were benefited by Elphinstone’s fine courage and the way he bore his trouble. It was as if he was still the head of his House, his influence telling. He was grateful for the gift of life that Desmond had been for abandoning. But, then, he came of a family of Christians, and had the light that helped his blindness. Desmond’s troubles began to look small even to himself. The parson’s text was working.

It was wonderful, although it was so pitiful, to see the cheerfulness of that hospital ward as the days went on. Stories were told and songs were sung. Cruelly marred and blasted, mere remnants of men, they jested about their misfortunes, gloried in their comrades’ successes, extolled Roberts or commiserated Gatacre, were grateful for the comforts that came

to them, looked forward to going home, but envied those who could remain here, their spirit whole in their marred bodies, officers and gentlemen in their red jackets and unshaven faces.

By the time Michael McKay got to Pretoria Desmond was nearly well. He had heard no more of Gabrielle. Hurriedly as she came, so hurriedly had she gone. Sometimes now it seemed as if it had really been a dream, or a nightmare; that she had been here, urging him to silence, threatening he knew not what. He knew he must seek her out before he went home, settle things up with her, and ask her that question which now seemed part of his delirium. He would accept all his obligations. But for the moment the greatest of them was to take his share in keeping up the spirit of the ward—"keeping up the tone of the house," as Jimmy called it.

When Michael came, term was nearly over; they were breaking up. Some were to be drafted to Pretoria, to find the superior accommodation and treatment the Pretoria hospital afforded; others were to go to Cape Town and thence home.

Desmond, his arm still in a sling, his blue eyes sunken in his thin brown face, met Michael outside the hospital tent. Michael, incongruous among the tethered horses on the pawed ground, the baggage waggons and men in shirt sleeves, was inquiring his way. All was cheerful haste, for they were to be up and moving before dawn.

"The field hospital? Just in front of your nose."

"Lord Grindelay? Oh, yes, he's there right enough, unless he's walking about somewhere."

"I saw him ten minutes ago, over there with the horses."

Michael did not recognise Desmond when he did see him—not for the moment. More than his expression had altered. There was little of the boy left in him, for all he was still so young. He had seen sights that had put chasms between himself and boyhood.

"Who was inquiring for me? Why, it's Michael McKay!" he exclaimed, flushing, holding out his hand.

"Desmond! It is Desmond, isn't it?"

Michael exclaimed, and then explained, all in the traditional Michael manner.

"A year is a long time. You've been away the best part of a year. And then, of course, you must have been exceedingly ill."

"You need not apologise for not knowing me," answered Desmond with a laugh. "I hardly know myself."

But after that, and Michael's protestations that it was only in the first moment of coming upon him unexpectedly that he had failed to recognise him, there was not quick or complete ease between them.

Desmond showed Michael the camp, made him free of its hospitality, thanked him for coming up. But when, later on, they spoke of Marley and those who had sent him, they spoke with constraint.

They were at Cape Town waiting for the steamer before the constraint loosened. The steamers were all over-crowded and the hotels full to their utmost capacity. All had been bustle and confusion on the way down from Pretoria, and there had been little opportunity for private conversation. Michael had taken an intelligent interest in all he saw, although his intelligence was often clouded by his pity, when he became silent and tried to hide it. Wounded men and officers were still pouring into Cape Town—the wastage of the army. And there were mothers and sisters, sweethearts and wives waiting, some of them in hastily-donned black. Elphinstone's mother was amongst them. Michael saw her meeting with her son, and other cruel meetings

He saw harpies also. Women in smart clothes, here on the pretence of helping, or being near their husbands, but swooping for pleasure amid the carnage—vultures to their filthy feast. And Gabrielle Radlett was amongst them. Gabrielle's name was the first to break the constraint between the young men.

Desmond was not yet aware that his mother knew of his marriage. He would not go home without her knowing it, home to Marley and Eunice, for all the loving messages Michael brought. He had been still weak when he left Water-val, with recurrent bouts of malaria, and he had even now but limited movement in his arm.

"If it were not for that I'd ask for leave to rejoin," he said almost inadvertently to Michael, as they sat smoking in the hall of the hotel. There were gay ladies going up and down the stairs, lingering in the vestibule, traffic passing between them and the men who but yesterday had gazed at death.

"The war is not over. No one who has been with those fellows as I have can believe they'll give in all at once."

"Your mother wishes you to come to Marley as quickly as possible."

Michael had been, as his father predicted, very helpful and attentive to Desmond these last few days, guarding him from fatigue, remembering when it was time for his medicine or tonic, saving him every possible inconvenience of the hot and tedious railway journey.

"I told you already in Waterval, you remember, that Lady Grindelay wishes you to come back as speedily as possible."

"She doesn't know," Desmond began dully.

"There is nothing she doesn't know," Michael answered ponderously.

That was the moment when Desmond became aware of Gabrielle coming down the stairs with shrill talk and laughter, Gabrielle with undraped shoulders and a light scarf, and a young man in attendance, a young man with a loose mouth and retreating chin, who answered her sallies.

"They don't know I'm married," he blurted out, and then went on desperately:

"That woman over there is . . . is my wife!" He expected an exclamation from Michael.

"She is nothing of the kind," Michael answered with decision.

Gabrielle's shrill voice came to them. In evening dress she was so much more vulgar than in nurse's costume; she was painted and her red hair brighter than he remembered it.

"I married her before I came out," Desmond repeated. Gabrielle had not seen them. And again Michael answered:

"No, you didn't. You thought you did. Perhaps I ought to have told you before," he went on, "but we seem to have

had so little time for talk. That is what I came out to tell you—the chief reason. My father and I found out she was already married when she went through that ceremony with you.”

Desmond dropped into his seat. The slightest agitation brought back the throbbing in his arm, a sickening disability. In the distance he could yet see Gabrielle and her companion. They were going out together; cloaking her was the man with the under-hung chin and the familiar manners.

“I can’t understand what you are telling me. How did you know? Does my mother know?”

Desmond’s brain was not acting well. The first shock of the news found him without the capacity to understand its full significance. There was a rush of pleasure, incomprehensible pleasure, then doubt and bewilderment. He had married Gabrielle from a sense of duty, because of something she had told him, and what his mother had said. Could it be true that she had already a husband? What had become of—— And then he left off thinking and looked at Michael.

“I may be an awful fool. I don’t understand a word you are telling me. Fact is, I am not quite myself. You say you know all about my marriage, and that everybody knows, that it isn’t legal; but——”

“Shall I begin at the beginning and tell you all we know?”

“I wish you would. My head is so woolly to-night; I’ve got no brain.”

But it came back to him when Michael told him of his meeting with Gabrielle at the War Office, and of all that followed, or of much that followed. Desmond listened in bewildered silence.

“You told my mother?”

“We had no choice.”

“What did she say?”

“My father told her. I was not there; but I understand it was not a great surprise to her. She seemed to think in some way she was herself responsible. Her great anxiety was that your cousin should know nothing, be told nothing. It

was just before her operation; she had just heard she must undergo an operation."

Desmond had already been told of his mother's illness.

"She did not wish her niece should have this further trouble." It was difficult for Michael to say that Lady Grindelay wished to spare her niece the knowledge of Desmond's marriage because she knew how unbearable it would be to the girl. He stopped.

"But afterwards, when everything was known?" Desmond persisted.

"Afterwards? Well, quite soon afterwards we knew it was no marriage at all. Then came the operation, and the news that you were not dead. There was no object in telling Eunice."

Michael's steady voice had a break in it; but Desmond, listening avidly, never noticed it. Not only was he free, but Eunice knew nothing of his folly, madness, wickedness.

"Go on."

Michael had to tell him that at first Lady Grindelay would not have Eunice know because it would add to her grief. Eunice was to continue to deck her altar to him with flowers, to keep his memory beautiful and sweet. And that afterwards she would not allow her joy in the news that he was not dead to be clouded by hearing that he had not been all she thought him.

Everything was for Desmond, whilst he, Michael, who loved her so much better, and had never faltered in loving her, was only here to tell the tale, to bring them together. He felt the bitterness of it as he went on:

"That is Lady Grindelay's great desire, her most urgent message to you. She insists upon secrecy. Eunice——" Desmond had a spasm of jealousy, he did not know that Michael had the privilege of her name. "Eunice is to know nothing. Your mother thought you might be writing to her. But you are to tell her nothing, except"—again Michael paused for an imperceptible second—"except that you are coming back to her as quickly as you can travel. I have a letter that I am not to give you until you are in full posses-

sion of all the circumstances; but I know what the gist of it is, and I am to tell you verbally, as Lady Grindelay told it to me, that you are to consider the incident closed, to be forgotten. We paid five thousand pounds."

"My mother gave her money?" he stammered.

"She made ample provision for the woman and her child. She did not hold you entirely to blame in the matter. She urged me to tell you this. All she asks in return is secrecy."

"But I must see Gabrielle."

"Why? Cannot I see her for you, if there is anything to be gained by it? There is nothing more to be said. We have our proofs."

"I insisted upon marrying her, she told me she was going to have a child——" Desmond spoke hesitatingly, in a stifled voice.

"That has all been arranged," Michael answered hastily. There seemed an indelicacy, an impossibility of pursuing the subject.

Michael knew he was also expected to make it clear that Lady Grindelay's opposition to a marriage between Desmond and his cousin had no longer to be faced, that she was eager for it now, urgent even. He could not speak of Desmond's child and of Eunice in the same breath. Michael thought he never could have done such a thing as Desmond had. All his friendliness was an effort.

* * * * *

Desmond had a recurrence of fever that night. Michael shared a room with him and tended him well, covering him with blankets in the shivering stage and administering quinine. When in the early morning Desmond lay exhausted and sleeping, Michael went downstairs to breakfast, and made the daily inquiry about steamer accommodation. So many were hurrying home. But there was one whom it was impossible to hurry, and when he embarked his voyage would be a longer one. Michael, when he heard that Eric Elphinstone had had a sudden attack of heart failure, that neither his mother nor he would be using their berths, hurried round at

once to see if it were possible to obtain the reversion of them. It was soon arranged. Lady Elphinstone saw him, and her eyes were illumined with something deeper than grief, and steadier.

"Eric has spoken so often of Lord Grindelay; he will be glad to know you are to have our berths," she told Michael. "He does not want our dear ones at home to see him as he is, I think it came to him as a relief when he was told yesterday evening that he was not to go. 'Not yet,' the doctors said; but he understood——"

She broke off. Her pride shone in her eyes, but her grief was grey in her cheeks and grey on her lips.

Michael looked out of the window as she spoke to him. The bay was full of shipping, painted funnels and white sails under the blue skies. Many sounds came up to him where he stood. But the sound of sobbing was louder than any of them. It was not in the room, nor from her; it was following the army home. Her voice had been steady, and his own words showed no feeling, even if his eyes could not face hers.

"Then we can have the berths?"

Not a word of sympathy could he get out, although, as they went through the little necessary business, his hand shook so that he was unable to sign the transfer. Cool, precise Michael came away all unnerved from that interview. He never told Desmond whose berths they were that he had secured. They were in England again before Desmond knew that "Elphie" had gone home, in his mother's arms, and so gladly.

CHAPTER XXI

ALL through that voyage, whilst Desmond was regaining his strength, growing healthily bronzed, discovering an appetite, Michael controlled his feelings and played the part he had been sent out to perform.

He "took care" of Desmond, saved him from imprudences, reminded him of liability to cold, urged the continuance of the quinine. He forced himself to talk of Marley, and those whom Marley held, when Desmond walked the deck by his side or started the subject when they were undressing in their cabin or lay in their bunks. Desmond was never tired of hearing of Marley. Every hour was taking him nearer to his home. He was obeying his mother's message literally, forgetting the past. Michael had executed his commission faithfully, however resentfully, omitting nothing. Desmond heard how Eunice had grieved for him, how his mother had despaired; that he was going back now as a hero, that there was nothing that would be denied or withheld from him. He had been a prisoner—not only of the Boers. He felt free, and every hour more lighthearted; a boy again, but happier than he had been as a boy. Then, perhaps unconsciously, he had been under the shadow of his parents' differences; now he was going back into sunshine. Michael thought no better of him because he obeyed his mother's commands so literally; he could sometimes not command himself sufficiently to remain with him.

"What a restless fellow you are," Desmond said on one of these occasions. "I'd no idea you were like that. I used to look upon you as so steady and staid. It's past eleven, and you want to go on deck again. Can't you go to sleep? We've had a good old jaw."

As the ship neared Southampton it became increasingly difficult for Michael to talk with Desmond about Marley or the future. He had carried out all Eunice's wishes, her spoken

and unspoken ones, as well as his instructions from Lady Grindelay. They would have had no anxiety; he had cabled from Pretoria, from Cape Town, and lastly from Madeira. They knew Desmond was better, that he was coming to them as fast as steamer could carry him.

Michael thought they would be met at Southampton, that Eunice might be there. It is one thing to carry out one's commission faithfully, another to see the girl you love in another man's arms; a man so unworthy! It was natural Michael should think Desmond unworthy of Eunice, for all the glamour of his wounds. Michael felt he could never have done what Desmond had, that no woman, however adroit, could have lured him to infidelity to Eunice. And perhaps it was true. The difference was in their ages and temperaments, as well as in the manner of their quixotry—in the Irish as opposed to the Scottish blood. Desmond talked to everybody, took part in all the impromptu gaieties that were got up on board. It was difficult for Michael to believe this gay, light-hearted youngster was the same person as the invalided soldier with his arm in a sling whom he had met outside the hospital tent at Waterval. Michael did not take sufficiently into account the fact that Desmond had been a prisoner and now was free. He was drawing long breaths, filling his lungs with air, unconsciously rejoicing in the strength that was returning to him, not reasoning but feeling. All his fetters had been struck off at one blow.

The sea flung its spray upon the deck and the sun shone. The wind was a following one and helped them along. The young people forgathered and behaved as young people do under such circumstances. They sometimes danced and they sometimes sang, taking a lively interest in one another. Young Lord Grindelay was the recipient of much attention, and he was no anchorite or churl; he had nothing of Michael's stiffness.

As they neared their destination everyone began to talk of "home," to search the horizon for coast-line or cliff. It was only Michael who was in no hurry. He thought it possible Eunice might be at Southampton, and he knew for how little

he would count in her life after Desmond had been restored to her. He saw those days of rejoicing at Marley, and the wedding that would so quickly follow. He alone watched not eagerly for cliff and coastline. The speeding ship, as it cut through the waters, was carrying him to nothing but loneliness. In bringing Desmond home he was doing the last thing he might do for her.

As he had anticipated, she was on the landing-stage, waiting. He saw her before Desmond, or anybody else, could distinguish one face from another in the crowd that stood on the quay as the ship came nearer and nearer to its moorings. Handkerchiefs were being waved and there was shouting. The last hour seemed the slowest of all the voyage. There was Eunice, with her waving handkerchief, and his father with her—two familiar figures. He pointed them out to Desmond presently, when he could command himself. Together he and Desmond watched them coming nearer and nearer. It was as if the platform was moving, and not the ship. At last they were near enough for the recognition to be mutual. When the stage was thrown out, Desmond was the first to step upon it. All that Michael had feared he saw. There was no holding back, no concealment. His father was wringing his own hand, welcoming him. But Eunice—Eunice was in Desmond's arms. They stood as if they were alone. He could see that it seemed to both of them as if all their days had been but to this end.

The train stood still in the station whilst luggage and passengers were promiscuously harried and delayed. There were other people in the compartment with them, but Michael saw no one but Eunice; the gauze twisted round her hat, her eyes alight and dancing, her cheeks flushed.

"He doesn't look a bit like a hero," she said gaily to Michael, whom she had forgotten to greet. "I don't believe he has ever been as ill as they said."

She was too happy to be serious. Desmond and she had hardly spoken to each other, but he had held her in his arms, his lips had touched her cheek, he was here. It was not her

lover, but her cousin, she was seeing in him just now, the boy with whom she had been brought up, her inseparable, beloved companion.

She had no girlish flutterings, surrendering to his kiss and returning it, but with an emotion no different from what it would have been had she been his sister. This was Desmond. It did not go beyond that for the moment. All the rest was to come. It throbbed in her heart and glistened in her eyes, but it was not for now. She was full of excited talk.

"Michael has nursed me like a brother," Desmond told her. She even forgot to thank him.

"I suppose you had a wonderful time out there?" she said to Michael almost carelessly, with unconscious cruelty. It was such a little while since she had seen Michael. "He was dying to go," she explained to Desmond, turning again to him. There were endless things she had to say to him—endless.

"Aunt Agatha says you are not to think she did not come to Southampton because she was not well enough. She is ever so well; she walked to the village yesterday. She won't come to the station either. She's waiting for you at the hotel. We are staying at the Buckingham Palace. We are going to be a whole fortnight in town. She said you were sure to want clothes." All her talk was for Desmond.

They were off at last. The guard waved his green flag, and the whistle of the engine was shrill and loud. All the luggage and passengers were in, and their compartment was crowded; suit-cases and portmanteaux on the floor, in the overcrowded racks, everywhere; umbrellas and rugs, strapped together, intruded on the seats. The train moved slowly out of the station. It was no moment for sentiment. Yet it was the only time when Michael became an individual in her eyes. Desmond was standing up to make safe the many packages over her head, and she had time to see Michael.

"You look worse than Desmond, Michael, although you were not in the war. Have you been sea-sick?"

Desmond dropped into his seat beside her again, and she did not even wait for the answer.

During the next hour and a half Desmond and Eunice talked to each other in eager whispers, and Michael heard all the office news from his father.

"I've missed you, dear boy," Andrew said affectionately. He, too, saw that Michael was not looking well. "You have found it very fatiguing, I dare say." Michael admitted to feeling fatigued.

"That will wear off in a day or two. There were so many new impressions——"

He spoke carelessly, but his father was scarcely deceived. He also noted the two in the corner, their eager whisperings. Michael listened with sufficient interest to the relation of what had been done in the matter of *Secker v. Secker*, and at what particular phase the case of *De Plevens v. the London and North Eastern Railway* had arrived. But the only question he put was hardly one of business at all.

"Is Lady Grindelay really quite well again? You say she is in London."

His father had taken to spectacles; he took them off before he answered:

"She will see a specialist in a day or two. Dr. Reid is coming up to town to meet him. She has not quite recovered from the operation."

"Recurrence?"

"There seems some doubt. But she wishes Desmond and everybody to believe she is quite well. They are going to give him a big reception at Marley—Desmond and all the Marley men who have come home. The Lord Lieutenant and the Mayor and the local volunteers are to be present, and the place will be decorated. You know the sort of thing. If Agatha is well or ill, whatever verdict the specialist has for her, nothing is to be discussed or known until after Desmond has gone home to Marley in state. After that, I suppose there will be the wedding."

He relapsed into silence; so did Michael. But Desmond and Eunice were still talking animatedly.

At Waterloo the party was to separate. Desmond suggested that Michael should look after Eunice whilst he col-

lected the luggage. When they were standing alone Eunice told Michael that Desmond could not say enough about his kindness. Michael answered:

"You told me to bring him back to you."

Eunice glanced at him, looked away again, flushed, understood.

"You see how it is," she went on irresolutely; she was sorry for Michael. "It has always been like that."

"I know."

"Desmond and I——"

"I know."

"He has not altered. You don't think him altered?"

"I think he is just the same."

Then she could not think of anything more to say. Desmond seemed a long time with the luggage.

"Auntie will be getting anxious, the train was late as it is."

"Would you like me to go and see if I can find him—hurry him?"

"Oh, no!" And then there was a pause. But she forced her thoughts away from Desmond, and set herself to be nice to Michael. Later on, when they had all calmed down, when she had become used to having Desmond at home again, and they were all at Marley, there were many things she would like to hear from Michael. How Desmond had been found, and what his brother officers said of him, and everything; she knew Desmond would never talk of his own exploits.

"You'll come down to Marley when we go back?" she said, in the effort to be nice to him. In the mirk of the railway station she looked more beautiful than ever. Poor Michael could hardly bear it.

"No; I don't think I will come to Marley; at least, not just yet. You haven't forgotten what I asked you in Newquay, have you? I don't think I want to see you and Desmond together."

He was, oddly enough, suddenly angry. Of what did she think he was made? But, of course, she had not been thinking of him at all.

"You are angry with me?" she said, in surprise.

Michael had never been like this while they were uncertain of Desmond's fate. She had not forgotten what he said to her by the Gannell River; girls do not forget such things. But she thought, since he knew about her and Desmond, he had not wished that either of them should remember. Now his manner made her uncomfortable.

"Of course not." But he said it stiffly, with difficulty and an absence of colour. "I am sorry if I spoke abruptly." For he saw her face had changed.

What he had in his mind one cannot know completely, but it may have seemed possible to him, even then, that the future might hold pain for her, or trouble. Michael thought Desmond unstable.

"There is nothing I would not do for you, you know that," he began again.

"I shall always be glad of your friendship, of course——" She hardly knew what to say.

"You can call it friendship if you like," he said almost sullenly.

"I wish it were friendship. Oh, Michael, can't we just be friends?" she cried.

"My feelings can never change," he answered.

She moved a step away from him, then nearer again, for she did not want to be unkind. He saw that she looked distressed.

"I know you don't want to hear it," he went on; "that my love is nothing to you, Desmond's everything. But a time might come——" He broke off. "And if ever you did want help——"

"I am sure you would do anything for me," she said hastily.

"You will never forget that, will you?"

He saw that Desmond was coming towards them, following a porter with a loaded trunk.

"You will think of me if you ever need help, or, or a friend. I will be anything to you that you wish. I shall never alter, I shall always be waiting."

"Oh, there you are!" Desmond's voice reached them. "Come along, I've got a cab. Your father has got your things together. Jolly good plan your having them marked like that."

Desmond hurried Eunice away, Michael had to look for and find his father.

"What was it he was saying to you?" Desmond asked her when they were in the cab. But he did not wait for the answer. He was looking at her, and said all at once:

"Isn't it wonderful?"

Then he took her hand, and Michael might never have existed at all for either of them.

They sat hand in hand all that slow way from Waterloo to the Buckingham Palace Hotel. But they hardly said a word except "Isn't it wonderful?" They seemed to have a complete understanding of each other, although nothing had been said of more moment than that. He had kissed her when he came off the boat, but it had been her cheek and not her lips that he had taken. Now they sat hand in hand and felt how wonderful it was.

Lady Grindelay met them in the hall of the hotel. She had been watching for their cab to drive up, and now stood in the hall.

"Here he is, auntie! Did you think we were never coming?"

"I was content to wait."

Desmond thought her unaltered, saw no reflection in her of his own agitation. He had a rush of feeling as he kissed her, remembering all she had done for him. He flung his arms about her.

"Mother, darling!"

She adjusted her cap, and said:

"You are as impetuous as ever, I see."

That was all she said, and yet she was much more moved than he, the mere sight of him was a vision of splendour, almost incredible, blinding in its effulgence; the touch of his young lips on her cheeks sent fire through her, stopping her breath.

They went up in the lift, leaving the luggage to follow. She remembered to tell the hall porter to pay the cab. Desmond said hastily he had plenty of change. He was thrown back upon himself, chilled by her reception.

The lift took them up to the sitting-room, and Desmond saw that it was full of flowers. Reynolds, his mother's incomparable maid, came out of the bedroom and said a respectful word of welcome.

"The flowers came up from Marley after you left," Lady Grindelay said to Eunice.

"I hope you haven't been tiring yourself arranging them."

"No; Reynolds did that."

CHAPTER XXII

NOT until after dinner did mother and son get any nearer. Before Eunice left them together they talked only of the war. Desmond was modest, as Eunice had expected, about his own exploits, but her eyes glowed when he told of gallant actions he had seen or of which he had been told. Her eyes glowed, but presently her cheeks paled, and her aunt said the girl looked tired and should go to bed early. Eunice's imagination realised these scenes he was depicting; she saw him in the forefront of them all. How wonderful that he should be here, talking of it, restored to her! Throb after throb of thanksgiving made her colour come and go emotionally.

"It's impossible to think you will be here in the morning," she said, with a laugh that had a sob, when, in obedience to Lady Grindelay's suggestion, she rose to go.

"To-morrow morning, and all the other mornings," Desmond answered in a tone that matched her own.

They were all a little constrained. Eunice kissed her aunt, and gave her hand to Desmond.

"Good night."

He opened the door for her.

"I am sure you must be too tired for any more talk," was the first thing his mother said when they were alone.

"I am not tired at all. But you—ought you not to rest?"

"I am tired of resting. I shall have time enough for resting."

She had so much to say to him, and such a difficulty in saying it. There had been nothing but misunderstanding between them, and now all was to be made clear. She would give him Eunice, let him see that she was proud of him and the reputation he had made. It was difficult. Easy perhaps to make up her mind that it had to be done, but almost im-

possible to do it. There was no intimacy between them. There had always been something to keep them apart. When she had thought him dead she wanted only his forgiveness. She craved more than that now, a son's love she would have from him, but thought it beyond her reach. She had ever shown herself cold and unloving to him. Even now she could not voice what she felt at his return, her pride in him. She could only sit erect and drop out her words as if they were of little importance. Outwardly she was little altered.

"I did not want you to go to bed to-night, your first night in England, without knowing that you are quite free as regards Eunice." The next sentence came more slowly: "I know that I misjudged you. . . ."

He was confused, anxious to avoid anything in the nature of a scene. But not as unloving as she thought him. He had always known he cared for her, and now he would have liked to tell her so.

"You didn't misjudge me. I made an awful fool of myself."

He came nearer to her. But she sat quite erect, and he thought she seemed to wish to keep the distance between them.

"We have agreed—haven't we?—that that particular incident is to be forgotten."

"I—I can't quite forget it," he said huskily.

"That is the one thing I must ask of you." Then she went on less steadily: "You will promise me that, will you not? I do not wish you to be less than a hero in her eyes, in anyone's eyes." In a lower voice she added: "I want your happiness to be untroubled, complete." She stopped.

Desmond was greatly moved.

"I am not fit for her," he broke out.

She had that throb of pride, that passionate contradiction, but no words to tell him of it. Eunice no longer counted in comparison.

"She need never know that," was all she could get out.

"I will do anything you say, mother." He felt the tension behind her limited words and began to speak agitatedly.

"You know how I regret everything, everything I have ever done to vex you. Mother, can't we be different together?" he said, rather desperately.

Poor stiff-tongued Agatha! She put out her hand to him uncertainly and he took it in his.

"I hope everything will be different," she said.

How could he guess that under her breast her breath came as if her heart was but a bruise beneath it, that to solace her pain he had but to lay his head there and say: "I love you, mother. Put your hand on my head and say you love me, too. I've longed to do it so often."

He kissed the hand that lay in his hurriedly, half ashamed, and she withdrew it, a faint flush on her old cheeks.

"I'll try to do everything you say. If Eunice's happiness depends on me, I'll try to be what you both wish me. If you think she ought not to know, I won't tell her. I don't know whether it's right——"

"There are stories girls may not hear, temptations of which one must not speak to them."

"I should hate to tell her. So if you really think she ought not to know——"

"I am sure it is unnecessary for her to know of these temptations, of any evil," she said with agitation. "We women, wives, are best left ignorant——"

"I'll make her happy, I know I can make her happy." His face flushed and he spoke huskily. "But you? Is there nothing I can do for you?"

"I want you to be happy." She wanted him to love her, but that she could not say. "You will care for Marley, hold your inheritance as a trust, remember you are a Wanstead? . . ."

But he did not want to hear of his inheritance, nor she to talk to him of what would happen when she was gone. Something of his happiness she wanted to see, to stay and see.

"I know now what a suitable and appropriate thing a marriage between you and Eunice will be. I want to see your unclouded happiness——"

Her manner touched him, that change of which Michael had spoken was so obvious, and yet not complete.

"And everything between us two will be different?"

"I hope so."

* * * * *

Everything between them *was* different, although without words or caresses to establish the change. Reynolds, that wonderful, understanding maid, knew that if a wrap were needed, Lady Grindelay liked her son to lay it across her shoulders. Then, when Desmond came into the room to bid her good morning or good night she detained him as long as possible, and when he was in the room with her, her eyes dwelt upon him. Eunice now took second place. Eunice knew this, and Desmond too, vaguely. He kissed his mother night and morning, asked how she had slept or how she felt, brought her roses and was awkward when she thanked him. "As if I could ever do enough for you!"

"But I have done so little for you."

In a way their positions were reversed, she felt she was in his debt, dwelt all the time upon her sins of omission, and tried to make up to him for them.

The fortnight in London passed very quickly. The war was by no means at an end. De Wet and his guerilla troops had begun to prove it.

"I never should have come home if you had not sent for me," Desmond told his mother.

"You are content?" she asked anxiously.

"Rather," he answered, smiling.

Agatha, too, was content, although the report of the specialist had not been too favourable, and already there were disquieting symptoms. No one but herself and Dr. Reid knew this, and it was to be kept from everyone else.

After Desmond had sat with his mother, visited his tailor, done the hundred and one little things demanded of him by friends or circumstances, he was free for long hours with Eunice. They were neither of them London bred or born, and they found it a delightful place for wandering. They

were sufficiently unsophisticated to find the Zoological Gardens entrancing, and Hyde Park a never ending delight. They visited the museums and the National Gallery, and did not even disdain Westminster Abbey and St. Paul's. Lady Grindelay saw no reason why they should not go to the theatre together, and many evenings were spent at the play. She put forward no claim to their companionship, happy in their happiness, wishful only to add to it. She did not want them to see or notice into what invalid ways she was growing. Everybody was in the conspiracy to keep them from knowing; Dr. Reid and Andrew, and above all, Reynolds.

"She's had a tiring morning, people coming in and out, letters to write," Reynolds would tell them, "perhaps it would be better to let her have a sleep after lunch. I'll tell her you came in to see her."

There was always some excuse or good reason why Lady Grindelay should be allowed to rest. Neither of the young folks ever saw her during the attacks of pain that were returning with alarming frequency. She always seemed well enough to sit up to dinner, to question them as to what they had seen or heard, to be interested.

"She looks at you all the time," Eunice told Desmond, "I hardly count with her now."

"You are not jealous?"

"I can't tell you how glad I am. I always knew you would understand each other one day."

But she and Desmond understood each other even better. They knew they were never to be separated again. The flaming, inevitable moment had not come yet, but it was always in the background, warming and exhilarating the days. They talked of their intimacy, sometimes Desmond had a sudden qualm of misgiving.

"We have never really been apart except that horrid war time and when you were a prisoner. Tell me about it again. I hate there to be anything you have seen and done that I haven't shared," Eunice said, more than once. "We seem to have been always together except then."

He told her of the red and rolling veldt, of sunsets over

lonely farms, of dust and the whizzing of bullets. He told her of long and lonely marches, of brave men and blunders, sniping shot that reached its billet, and of empty saddle. He told her of the hospital at Waterval; could speak to her, although with difficulty, of Jimmy Thwaites and Elphie.

"I seem to see it all as clearly as if I had been there. We'll make Jimmy come to Marley, won't we? He can be wheeled about the grounds. We could take him on the river."

"Rather! He's with his people now, but they are not very well off. I'd like to do something for him, look after him."

She pressed his arm. "So would I. We always want the same thing, don't we?"

* * * * *

There came an hour when speech between them grew a little frayed or fretted. They had had a long day together, there were only two more before they would be again at Marley. Eunice knew of the welcome that awaited Desmond, but the preparations were being kept a secret from him. He could never agree that he had done anything deserving of admiration in letting his men be cut up, in refusing to surrender. He was very silent about the whole episode, not caring to hear it alluded to. He knew what had lain at the back of his courage, why he had been so ready to give up his life. He was trying to forget, but it was not easy. Eunice's happy confidence that she knew everything about him sometimes sent a qualm through him. He could not talk of the Waterval hospital and forget Gabrielle had been there, nor of Cape Town, without seeing her go out of the door of the hotel with undraped shoulders, laughing and talking with her companion. He did not want to remember, but he did.

"I think we shall have to leave off talking about South Africa," he said when they drove back to the hotel that afternoon. "I was so far away from you, desperately home-sick at times, not very happy. I'd like to forget it sometimes if you don't mind."

"And I have been talking of nothing else all day."

"I know. And just begun again." She was surprised to see how nearly irritable he was.

"Why did you not tell me so before?" she exclaimed. If he did not care to talk about South Africa, of course, they would talk of other things. But she could not think of many others at dinner time, and it was her aunt's favourite topic too.

Desmond could not escape all the consequences of his sobriquet, and the story that had been in all the newspapers. He was lionised a little, invited out to dinner, made rather a fuss of. He refused as many invitations as his mother would allow. But when their own friends made a point of his presence at this or the other entertainment, when Eunice was invited with him, and there seemed no reasonable excuse that he should stay away, Lady Grindelay pointed out to him that he must not get a reputation for exclusiveness or eccentricity.

"You will have to take your place in Society when we go back to Marley. There is a certain duty we owe to our neighbours. You will have both to dispense and receive hospitality; it has always been expected of us, and I think fulfilled. I have not given balls, but——" And she told of garden and dinner parties, fêtes, and when the gardens had been illuminated. Some of these entertainments both Eunice and Desmond could remember.

To-night, therefore, because Lady Grindelay thought it the right thing, they were going to a dance, a dance got up in Desmond's honour by the Fevershams. The Fevershams had a house in Great Marley, although they were in London now. They were not exactly County, but Mrs. Feversham was a distant, very distant, cousin of their nearest neighbours, the Campdens.

Desmond thought he had never seen Eunice look prettier than she did to-night, in the white evening frock, with the string of pearls round her neck, and her fair hair snooded with its blue ribbon. He could not make out what had made him suddenly irritable or impatient with her a little while ago, he was now full of remorse.

When they were in the brougham, on the way to the Fevershams, he began to tell her so.

"I was rather a brute this afternoon, wasn't I?"

"No, of course you were not. How many dances are we going to have together? Auntie says we are not to make ourselves too conspicuous."

"Do you want to dance with anyone else?"

"You know I don't."

He had never actually asked her to marry him. Now suddenly he felt he must make sure. He put out his hand to possess himself of hers.

"You don't want to dance with anybody but me?"

"Our steps go so well together."

"I wasn't thinking only of that."

"You're crushing my dress; can't you move a little?" He did not stir. "You are not cross again?"

"I'm not cross, I'm impatient, that's all."

"To get to the Fevershams?" But she knew better, for all the innocent way she said it, and her heart beat a little faster.

"I don't care if we never get there at all."

"But I look so nice. You told me yourself I looked nice."

"You look like an angel. But I'm not sure I want anyone else to see it."

She laughed happily.

"Auntie will want to know if anyone took any notice of me. I believe she thinks I am a little country-cousinish to go about with you. It is you everybody really wants, not me. You will have to be introduced to all sorts of people to-night. Do you want me to sit in a corner all by myself whilst you are dancing and being lionised?"

"I don't want to be lionised."

They were already in Eaton Square. The sound of the string band came to them. Eunice was young enough and gay enough at heart to feel the call of the music.

"You'll have to wait until we get inside, you know."

He saw her eyes dancing, and that her feet wanted to emulate them.

In another five minutes his arm was round her waist and there was not a handsomer couple in the room. The mere joy of the valse filled her, and they were exquisitely in step.

"I haven't forgotten how to dance, have I?"

"We couldn't be better together."

To-night, to-night he knew he would tell her what he wanted of her. She must be his wife as soon as possible. He could not wait any longer. She was fond of him, but he wanted more. His blood was tumultuous to-night, and she was so cool and smiling.

"Don't hold me so close," she breathed, for his hold had tightened suddenly.

"I shall hold you as close as I like," he answered, disobeying her. She laughed lightly.

"I'm out of breath."

One last turn and it was over; they were in the stream of the others going towards the refreshment room.

"You want an ice?"

"No, I don't. I want to sit down."

"We'll find a place." Her hand was on his arm. "Come in here."

"Here" was a conservatory full of exotic plants and palms, chairs arranged in twos, many of them occupied. Now she no longer held his arm but followed where he piloted her. When they were in the shadow of the deepest greenery, he stopped abruptly. They were really alone for the moment, their pulses throbbing from the dance.

"I can't let you dance with anyone else to-night," he said unevenly; and then put his arms about her. She stood in his embrace, her heart beating, strangely excited. "You know why, tell me you know why?" But she did not speak and he went on: "I know you're fond of me. How fond are you? That's the question." His arms tightened about her and she went a little pale. "Do you love me better than anything in the world; as I love you?" He sought her lips now, and she yielded them to him at first, but then would have drawn back, resisting. He would not let her go, startling her.

"Do you understand? You often say we understand each other. I want you for my wife, *my wife*." He strained her again to him. She put out a tremulous, restraining hand and went pale.

"What a brute I am! I'm frightening you. You don't know how I feel to-night, how I've been feeling all day. I'll be gentle—don't be frightened. Darling! But kiss me. Oh! my darling, darling; how I've longed for you!"

* * * * *

"You do love me?" he asked hungrily.

"I have always loved you."

"You couldn't dance with anyone else to-night, nor have anyone else's arm round you?"

"No."

"You understand now how I love you?" He held her close. "I love you in every way, in ways you don't dream of. I'm desperate because I know I'm not good enough for you. But you'd forgive me anything, wouldn't you? That is the sort of way you care for me, isn't it? Say it is; that it wouldn't matter what I did." His lips seemed insatiable for hers.

She thought he meant that it would not matter what he did to her. She muttered that she did not care what he did. She wanted to run away from him, yet to stay with him, to hide her head, and to go on looking at him, to feel his arms about her. She wanted him to know how she loved him, then her cheeks crimsoned, her eyes were lowered, and she was ashamed of the flooding crimson of her love for him.

"It will never be the same between us again," he whispered. "Not after this."

It would never be the same. And yet she felt that it had never been different, although so deep down.

"Tell me again that you love me."

"I—I can't talk."

Neither could he. He laid his lips on hers again. What was so wonderful was that this Desmond was still the other one, her brother and companion, her intimate.

"You did not always love me like this?" she said falteringly.

"Yes, I did, but I held myself back. You were little more than a child. You are still so young, and innocent, and

ignorant. Oh, Eunice, my love, my little love, I wish I had never been away from you," he cried. He wished he could have come to her as she to him. "If only I were more worthy of you," he said.

"Perhaps we should not have known how we cared for each other if we'd always been together," she said. She spoke low, and the flush was lovely in her cheeks and glowing eyes. What had flamed between them had made everything different, it was as if she had come into a fortune, the future was golden with promise.

"I've always known of it," he answered.

When they got back to the drawing-room, Desmond was impatient of the people who spoke to him, who wanted to shake him by the hand, and tell him what they thought of him; he wanted to do nothing but sit beside Eunice, or dance with her.

"I wish we were in the conservatory again."

But she had got back something of her self-possession, for all that she was so gloriously happy. Her lips throbbed from his kisses, and her shoulders were warm where his arms had lain, but she was not Agatha's niece for nothing, she knew how to behave.

"You must not stay here, everybody wants to talk to you," she told him.

"Do *you* want to talk to me?"

"We have all our lives before us," she answered happily.

"They won't be long enough."

"But just to-night, because auntie will want to hear of everything, you must not stay beside me. The party was given for you. Go and be congratulated, made a hero of——"

"I've nothing to be congratulated upon except that you care for me."

"We ought to pretend."

"We ought to do nothing of the sort."

"Auntie would not like us to make ourselves conspicuous."

"As if you wouldn't be conspicuous anyhow. Don't you know how pretty you are?"

"Am I?"

"Are you? Don't you know you are?"

"I am glad you think so."

"Come along; they are striking up again. I must have one more dance."

* * * * *

In the brougham going home he said that he wanted her to marry him as soon as it could be arranged.

"I don't feel sure of you. So many things might happen."

"What could happen?"

"You might change your mind, take a sudden dislike to me."

"Haven't I known you all my life?"

"But you didn't know this."

She answered him low, when her lips were free, when he would listen, that in a way she too had always known it. She let him see right into her pure, yet passionate heart. She might not know all the song of love; but she was familiar with the melody, for it had sung between them always.

"You don't know all that love means, love like ours, he whispered.

He could make her blush and edge away from him; he could lure her back until she lay again close folded in the shelter of his arms. But he could not make her falter in her belief that she had nothing more to learn of her love for him.

"I knew you were not dead, I felt you were alive all the time. I told auntie I should know if anything had happened to you. I am so much more intimate with you than she has ever been, I know all you do and even think——"

He was quieter after she had said that, he did not even kiss her again. She ought to be told. He had no doubt she ought to be told. She did *not* know all he had done, nor all that had led up to his folly. He could not tell her now; but even now he wished that she knew. He had got to that already. He wished he had not agreed to silence. He knew that one day he would ask his mother to release him from his promise. But not yet, not until Eunice was his wife.

CHAPTER XXIII

"MOTHER, you won't make us wait?" Desmond asked when he told his news. Lady Grindelay no longer felt jealousy, and as for misgiving, it was impossible. She could see no fault in him.

"Only sufficient time to make proper preparations," she answered.

"Must there be a fuss?"

"We have our duty to our neighbours," she said again. "The Wansteads of Marley cannot get married as if they were the Joneses of Nowhere."

But she was almost as anxious as he, for she knew that her days might be few. But that was a small matter. There would be Wansteads of Marley for all time, and everything had come right. Desmond would keep up the hot-houses, she made him promise that, and build more cottages. He would have promised anything.

"You will be satisfied if I can arrange the date a month from to-day?" she asked him.

"I'd be better satisfied if it were a week."

"Give me a little time. Let me arrange matters properly for you." He kissed her.

"Of course, I know you'll do your best for me, mother darling."

And the "Mother darling" showed how everything had changed between them, the kiss too. He had got to know that his caresses, though never invited, were nevertheless not unwelcome to her. To-morrow they were all going down to Marley together. She knew what awaited him there, and lay in bed all that day to rest herself for the coming emotion and fatigue.

"You and Eunice must amuse each other to-day. Reynolds won't let me get up. Reynolds is growing into a tyrant. I have given in to her too much, but I will change all that when we get back to Marley."

Desmond thought she remained in bed because she wanted to leave the sitting-room of the hotel free for them, it was a wet day and they did not need to go out.

At Marley great preparations were being made. Andrew came up to the hotel in the afternoon and told her all the details. Already the town was decorated, and the village gay with bunting; triumphal arches had been erected and the carriage would be drawn up to the Court by men, not horses.

"He knows nothing about it?" Andrew asked.

"Nothing definite. I think a hint may have reached him, for he suggested just now we should go by the morning instead of the afternoon train."

Then she told her good news.

"We planned and planned, like fools. But Providence planned better."

Andrew did not think they had planned like fools. Michael would have made a good husband to the girl, and looked after the estate.

"She will never know anything of that episode in his life," Agatha went on contentedly.

"You still think that wise?"

"You should see their happiness together. Then you would not question the wisdom. If she thought she had not always been first with him——"

"But supposing it came out?"

"It never will come out. The woman was well paid, she has nothing to gain by revealing it. Besides, they will settle down at Marley. She will never seek him out there."

Lady Grindelay was impatient of a doubt cast upon the wisdom of her decision, and Andrew had no desire to vex her. She told him of Desmond's wish, and her own, that there should be no undue delay, and gave him promptly, and as if she had it all cut and dried, the instructions for settlements. Desmond must, of course, be master of the estate, but Eunice was to have her jointure.

"You seem to have thought it well over."

Andrew was struck by her precision, by the clearness of her instructions.

"I have thought of nothing else since I knew he had been found."

They went down to Marley the next day. In the train Lady Grindelay told Desmond something of what he might expect on his arrival, she did not wish him to be wholly unprepared. He had been already struck by the number of Marley faces he had seen on the platform at Paddington, and the way they had seemed to surround them. He fumed over what she told him nevertheless, and said "What rot!"

"I am sure you will bear yourself becomingly, if your tenants or your neighbours wish to do you honour."

"It is such awful rot," he repeated.

But Eunice agreed with his mother that it was only fitting a reception should be given him.

"I am not expected to make a speech, am I?"

"If there is an address you will certainly have to reply."

"Good lord, mother, you don't mean to say there is likely to be anything of that sort! I feel like dropping out of the train before it gets to Marley. I had no idea—you'll stand by me, won't you? It's worse than going into action." He got quite red.

And notwithstanding all they told him he was not prepared to find the station hung with flags and decorated with bunting, to see the mayor in his robes on the platform accompanied by a deputation, to have a little girl dressed in white, the daughter of one of the town councillors, holding out a basket of flowers to him shyly.

"But this isn't for me?" he said.

She was small and bewildered, standing there, holding the flowers out to him. He took the offering and passed it on to his mother.

There was quite a crowd on the platform, and that seemed the signal for a burst of cheering. All at once he found himself listening to that address he had feared; his mother and Eunice on either side of him, and the men he had seen at Paddington formed up behind him. The address was very short. The mayor said his fellow-citizens had turned out to welcome him home, because he had not only "covered himself

with glory, but had brought honour to their town." Then he said a word about those who had been left behind.

A sudden thought of Eric Elphinstone came to Desmond, and he brushed his hand against his eyes.

"Those who had been left behind."

He did not hear much more of the address after that. He caught a word or two about his mother, and what she represented, the old order that was passing away; feudalism. The mayor and Lady Grindelay had met over many a relief fund and work of charity; feudalism was the root word in their vocabulary of social service.

"Little Marley is a model village; Great Marley owes much to her benefactions. You are the worthy son of a most worthy mother. She must be proud of you, and we, too, are proud that you are our fellow-citizen. . . ."

Now Desmond found himself stammering out a few words of thanks. He caught sight of Sir John and Lady Campden. If it had not been for that, he thought, he could have acquitted himself better. He would never see their cheery boys again.

"I didn't do anything different from the other fellows, I only had better luck. If I've been any good at all to—the Empire, as you say, it's because of my mother. She—she always thought such a lot of England." He knew he was making an unmitigated ass of himself. He turned to the men behind him in their khaki uniforms. "The honours, and all that, should be for these chaps, not for me, not for the officers. They followed us anywhere we led and fought like heroes. It was they who did all the fighting."

"If we'd always had leaders like you!" one of the men said gruffly.

"I needn't say any more, need I?" Desmond asked his mother quickly. "We can get on now, can't we? Thank you, and thank you again."

He drew her hand through his arm, and tried to pass. But everyone wanted to shake hands with him, to say a personal word. In his blue serge suit, with his bronzed face and blue eyes, he looked very young and embarrassed as he tried to get

through the people who said they were proud of him. Lady Campden, in her deep mourning, held her handkerchief to her eyes; he caught the sound of her sobbing. One of the boatmen from Eton rafts thrust his way to the front and insisted upon shaking hands.

"God bless you, milord. You'll recollect my boy Jack, who went out with you; his last letter was full of your kindness to him. His mother wanted to come up with me to thank you. But when the time came she couldn't face it; him being left behind. But I was to tell you she was grateful."

"That's all right, Evans. I'll come and see her one day, tell her so."

He remembered young Evans, who went down at Magersfontein; the last he saw of him was bloodstained and begrimed, wounded to death, trying to raise himself, to pull a trigger, to have one last shot at the enemy.

Desmond knew he should disgrace himself before all these people if he began to think how many he had seen the last of, and how they fell. It was all very well out there, but here at home they were no longer only soldiers, these lost comrades of his, they were sons and brothers, sweethearts, husbands. He could not face the womenfolk, he was seeing battlefields, the cries of the wounded came to him.

But his mother would not let him hurry. Many eyes were wet with tears, but Lady Grindelay's old eyes shone as if they were young again. This was the happiest hour of her life, the proudest.

Outside the station there was a great crowd waiting. Entrance to the station had been by ticket, and they were a picked and decorous crowd. But outside there were the townspeople and villagers, and many from Amersham and Beaconsfield, and the adjacent towns. When they caught sight of Desmond they broke into cheering.

"'No Surrender Grindelay!' Three cheers for 'No Surrender Grindelay!'"

Hats were thrown in the air, voices shouted, the flags floated in the breeze, and the military band played "See the conquering hero comes."

They had difficulty in getting to the carriage. The horses had been taken out and men were harnessed to it. The procession formed and followed them, the soldiers in khaki, the blaring band. All the slow way to the Court crowds were cheering, bunting was flying, and they passed under triumphal arches bearing legends, "Welcome Home!" "England welcomes her heroes!" "Long life to Marley Warriors!"

Eunice's eyes were wet and misty. Agatha sat erect, bowing right and left as if she were a queen. The scene may have been a little ridiculous to anyone who did not know its significance. Agatha felt a queen to-day, among her own people, with this fine young son of hers beside her. It seemed fitting they should all turn out to do him honour.

As for Desmond, he was very uncomfortable and supremely embarrassed, and would have given anything to have been able to escape.

At the village of Little Marley there were more speeches. Little Marley could not boast a mayor and councillors, but there were the schoolmaster and the oldest inhabitant, school children and the rest. This time Desmond could only stammer out that it was awfully good of them, that he was sure he didn't deserve their welcome. He would not even stand up in the carriage. Lady Grindelay felt impelled to take the task out of his hands. When they saw she was going to speak, they crowded round; but she was quite unembarrassed, and sat well forward.

"My dear son is too much moved by his reception to be able to respond as he would wish. He bids me tell you that if he fought well it was because he was fighting not only for England but for Marley. There have always been Wansteads here, as you know. And many of them have fought for their country. His gallant brothers in arms, these Marley men," she looked at them, "rode by his side, and you know how they acquitted themselves. If you and they are proud of him, you can guess how much prouder I am—his mother." She stopped there a minute, and they cheered her.

"Good old Polly Providence!" one shouted.

"And there is another proud one here," she indicated

Eunice, "almost equally well known to you all, a Wanstead too, who is soon to be his wife——"

She was not allowed to go on.

"Long life to them both."

She wanted to make her announcement at that dramatic moment, and they caught her intention quickly. It had always been expected, but they cheered and cheered. Eunice was a little overcome, and Desmond, seeing her turn pale, bent forward from his seat and took her hand. They cheered that too, and he relinquished it quickly.

There seemed some little confusion or disorder at the back of the crowd. They caught a glimpse of a woman without a bonnet, red-faced and dishevelled, with grey hair. Then the crowd closed up and shut her out from their sight.

"She's drunk his health once too often," one of the men beside the carriage said, laughingly. "There'll be many of them in that way to-night."

Lady Grindelay motioned to the men to go on after she had made her speech.

"You did not mind my speaking for you?" she asked Desmond.

"Good heavens, no! Isn't the thing nearly over? Can't we have the horses put to, or get out and walk? Haven't we had enough?"

"Don't be ungrateful. It is only for a little while longer. Be patient."

They were drawn right up to the lodge gate. Desmond could not be restrained then, he jumped out.

"Come along," he called to Eunice.

"May I?" she asked her aunt, but hardly waited for the answer. There were flags on the lodge too.

Late that evening, after dinner, when all had been discussed, the arches and speeches admired, and every incident remembered and magnified, all to Desmond's honour, Eunice said:

"I wonder what became of that poor woman, the one they said was drunk. I hope someone took care of her, that she

wasn't crushed or trampled upon. I wonder who she was? I seem to remember her, to have heard her voice before."

Neither Desmond nor Lady Grindelay had seen or heard anything but a slight scuffle or confusion.

"I'll go down to the village if you like, after dinner," Desmond said, "and inquire."

"The club house is to be kept open until twelve. We are entertaining the men there. They would appreciate your visit, you would have quite an ovation."

"Then I'm hanged if I go. I've had enough of ovations," he added hastily, "unless you want me to go?" He spoke to both the women.

Eunice was not anxious he should leave the house unless she went with him. Lady Grindelay thought it permissible that Desmond should remain quietly at home with them that first evening. As for the woman of whom Eunice spoke, nothing serious could have happened to her or they would surely have heard.

"Her voice was strangely familiar to me," Eunice said again. "And yet I don't seem to have heard it for a long time. She seemed to be angry about something, or scolding. It was as if I remember her always scolding or grumbling."

But the impression was a faint one, and faded quickly before Lady Grindelay's next speech.

"Those children will have to be marshalled differently before the wedding. They just stood about anyhow and stared. They must go in twos, dropping flowers."

She began to plan the wedding festivities.

"I shall do it all from Marley. The marquee on the lawn, and the refreshments."

CHAPTER XXIV

DESMOND and Eunice pleaded for a holiday when the morrow came. They wanted a day by themselves, a day in the woods, to be let off all visits of ceremony and echoes from yesterday's fête. Lady Grindelay was doubtful, and thought it a little irregular. People might call, and Desmond ought to be there to receive them. But she could deny Desmond nothing, was unable to say "No" to him.

The next few days hardly need chronicling. Lady Grindelay was kept up by circumstances. Everything seemed to be shaping to her wishes. Even the *Odontoglossum* showed symptoms of flowering, and Sanders was watching it by night and day. All the preparations were being pushed forward. Desmond had persuaded her to shorten the waiting time by a week. She had attacks of pain, but her courage overrode them. Dr. Reid was in constant attendance; but he and Reynolds kept the secret well. The young people were to go to Switzerland for their honeymoon. Lady Grindelay promised to nurse herself whilst they were away. If a second operation were unavoidable, she would go through with it then. Their home was to be at Marley, of course. A suite of rooms was to be re-furnished, bathrooms were to be added; already workmen were coming and going, measurements being made, papers and tiles being chosen. There were to be modern comforts, but without any alterations in the main features of the rooms. There was talk of an electric installation; but carvings and mouldings had to be considered.

And, of course, there was the trousseau. Boxes of underclothes came down from town, and all the needle-women in the village were already employed. Madame Pariset herself, with two assistants, came from London, and took orders for twelve dresses, the wedding-gown amongst them.

Lady Grindelay saw to all details herself; there was no end to what she wished to do for them. She asked whether

they liked this or that, approved of this or the other. Her anxiety to please them, or rather Desmond, was touching. But they only really wanted each other, to enjoy together the days in the mellow woods, or afloat on the quiet river. They were so happy that they could hardly speak of the future. The woods were a cathedral where their love became sanctified. Oak and ash and elm interlaced their boughs and sighed in benediction, fluttering down their leaves. The birds delayed their flight, twittering wedding songs, and the skylark sang its pæan over their heads, pouring it out like a triumph. The long days were all too short. Each night when they parted his eyes said that such partings would soon be at an end. And hers downcast, or the faint flush that came into her cheek, or the way her hands clung to his, answered that she too knew it. And Agatha watched them. Whether they were in her sight, or by themselves in the woods, or on the river, she watched them. She had made so many mistakes. Looking back, it seemed her life had been one long mistake. Her conduct to her step-mother, her rejection of Andrew, the way she had failed in obtaining Monica's confidence, then her own hasty and ill-considered marriage. But now, now everything was coming right, and when her time came she could go in peace.

She would not have the announcement of the engagement in the London papers. Andrew believed she had a vague idea that Gabrielle Radlett might see it there, and he found occasion to let her know that Gabrielle Radlett was still in South Africa.

There is no doubt she is feathering her nest well out there. I hear she has the Duke of Illminster in tow now. Some South African paper announced an engagement between them. His mother is hurrying out to them."

"But the woman's husband is still alive!"

"No. He died in prison a few weeks before his release. But you need not have any misgiving. She is flying at higher game now than Desmond."

Agatha said indignantly that she had no misgiving, never had had a misgiving. Nevertheless, the preparations were

hurried on, and, through that conversation with Andrew, Desmond secured his extra week. Three altogether, and one and a half of them were already gone, when, at the dinner table, Eunice, like a stone into still waters, dropped her irrelevant remark.

"Oh, Desmond, I forgot to tell you, I have remembered whose voice that woman's reminded me of. Isn't it funny? I dreamt of her last night. And when I woke this morning I remembered quite well. Didn't Desmond have an Irish nurse, auntie; when he was quite a small boy? Usen't she to quarrel with mine? It was of Desmond's old Irish nurse she reminded me."

"What, Biddy! You can't remember Biddy. She hasn't been here since I was seven years old."

He appealed to his mother.

"She can't remember Biddy, can she, mother? She couldn't have been more than four years old at the time. I wrote to poor old Biddy from South Africa, she was awfully devoted to me. Mother, it wouldn't be possible, would it? If it were possible I'd like to have her and Larry at the wedding. It wouldn't be too much of an undertaking for them to come over, do you think? Biddy must be nearly seventy. A good old sort."

"I believe she is here, that she came over to see your triumphant entry. I'm sure I knew her voice," Eunice insisted.

"Eunice certainly could not remember Biddy—a drunken and disreputable old woman." Lady Grindelay spoke with unusual difficulty, and both of them looked at her with surprise. She tried to command herself. "She had a very bad influence on you."

Desmond caught her meaning and flushed. So much had been forgotten, now it seemed that that scene at Languedoc, at his father's funeral, was still remembered. But he could not be disloyal.

"It wasn't Biddy's fault," he said quickly.

"I never want to hear her name again," his mother answered heavily. And then, noting his expression, added: "I

would rather not send for any of your old Irish pensioners——”

“Of course not, not if you don’t want to. I’m sorry I mentioned it.” He was surprised at the way she had met his request, quite an idle one. He never guessed what was at the back of her refusal, or, if he guessed, he guessed wrongly. He thought the memory of his conduct at Languedoc still hurt her. He was angry with himself for having revived the past, and showed his regret all through the evening by being almost demonstratively affectionate.

It was no reminiscence of Languedoc or his father’s funeral that had distressed Lady Grindelay. But Andrew had told her Gabrielle Radlett’s baby had been sent to Biddy! An indefinable fear seized upon her. Afterwards in the big drawing-room with the William and Mary furniture, embroidered covers, and heavy curtains, she regained her self-possession. Biddy could not be at Marley, impossible that any danger could threaten! Only nine more days to the wedding. Yet, for the first time, a doubt assailed her. Why had she been so anxious Eunice should know nothing of Desmond’s story? The girl would have some day to bear her woman’s burden of disillusionment. Should she learn it now, at this late hour, her trust complete and her faith unbounded, would it not be more painful than if she had known it when his absence had invested him with so much romance that in the blaze of it even this might have been obscured? In any case, it was too late now. She had imposed her will upon both Andrew and Desmond, and if she had any mis-giving neither of them must know it.

“I am sorry I had to oppose you about having your old nurse over,” she said to Desmond after Eunice had left them. Desmond answered quickly:

“Never mind, mother. Don’t give it another thought.”

“I don’t want you to think me prejudiced, but she was always very difficult, and not sober.”

“I know. I wish I had not asked it; it was only an idle thought. Forget it, mother. You’ve been so good to me, and you’ve forgotten so much.”

"You were so young," she said.

"Everybody is so good to me. Sometimes it seems impossible I can be so happy," he broke out, surprising her by his impetuosity and emotion. But he was convinced now of her sympathy. "I want to call in the whole world to see. But not Biddy, or Larry, if you don't wish it." He put his hand on hers. "I'm growing more what you wanted me to be, mother, aren't I?" His tone asked that her emotion should meet his, her sympathy overflow in words.

"I have no fault to find with you."

"I'd like to make up to you for everything."

"There is very little for which you have not compensated me," she answered. And she had hardly before said so much as that to him, although she had known it so well. It had been for him, more than for Eunice, that she had imposed secrecy upon them all; that no one should find fault with or condemn him.

"Have I? Have I? When we began to talk of Biddy it reminded me. . . ."

"Of what neither of us wished to remember." He caught the agitation in her voice.

"We won't talk of it again, then. But it was curious that Eunice should have thought she recognised Biddy's voice, wasn't it?"

"Very strange."

"Not possible, you think?"

"Quite impossible."

And then that faint, indefinable misgiving came over her again.

"I cannot bear to think of her in the same town with you, with either of you," she said involuntarily.

Desmond did not, of course, know the secret of her intolerance of Biddy's presence in Marley.

"You're not going to have a bad night, are you? There's no need. Biddy can't be at Marley without our knowing of it. Eunice is imaginative, she often had strange dreams, you know. She thinks of me all the time. Mother, isn't it beautiful the way she thinks of me, and knew I should come back

although everybody else thought I was dead? I'm not nearly good enough for her. I'm so glad now that you wouldn't let me tell her about—about that. She could never have understood. She's so innocent, living here all her days by you, and in the woods. Oh! mother, if I should fail her!"

"You won't fail her."

"I failed you both once." His voice was low.

"She will never know."

"If the McKays had not found out that it was no marriage!"

"Be thankful they did. Forget it!"

"I've never been anything but thankful; overwhelmed sometimes when I think of what might have been. I couldn't face life without Eunice, I want her in every way. Sometimes I can't believe it is true, that in nine days we shall be married, that we are going away together. How good you've been to us!"

She had never been gentler, nor spoken to him more openly than to-night.

"I am being good to myself too, I want you both here. It seems like a dream to me, too, sometimes. Such a good dream to stay with me whilst you are honeymooning. Marley, with both of you to come after me! You will have children. I want to see your children running about in the garden. It seems only yesterday when you and Eunice played there. I did not understand having a son then."

"I wanted to climb into your lap sometimes, like Eunice did. When I was disobedient and defiant it was because I was miserable. I thought England was going to be a dreadful place, all laws and restrictions; and that you'd hate me. But you weren't a bit like what I expected, and I couldn't bear to think of you hating me. You don't know how strange it was. I wanted to kick and scream to see what you'd say or do. But what I wanted most of all," he was fingering her dress and telling her these strange things with a far-off wistful look, "was that you should snatch me up, and kiss me, or that you should soften down on me with one of those smiles you kept for Eunice."

"Do you wonder I cannot bear to remember those days—Languedoc or Ireland, with those old servants who set you against me?" she interrupted agitatedly.

She was not consciously disingenuous, but greatly moved and unwilling to show it.

"Things were better after I went to Eton, weren't they?"

"It is best of all now."

"It will be better still when we come back."

CHAPTER XXV

BIDDY could not have been at Little Marley without either Desmond or his mother knowing it. But she could be, and was, at Great Marley, laid up in the hospital since the day of Desmond's triumphant entry. She had a burden in her arms when she was brought there. Biddy had not been injured by the crowd, she had no broken limbs, nothing but a bruise or two. But Biddy had been drinking for years, and that, with the excitement following close on her journey, a little rough usage, perhaps from the crowd, and the ungovernable rage into which she had fallen when her way to the carriage was impeded, had brought on what the hospital matron called "D.T.'s," and the young house surgeon, "cirrhosis of the liver."

The diagnosis or prognosis is unimportant. All the afternoon of Desmond's home-coming she had drunk and maudled and cursed, and in the evening she had been brought here. At first she was violent, disturbing the other patients by her cries, and her removal to the infirmary ward of the workhouse had been discussed. This would have been *en route* to the county asylum. But they wanted to see if she would improve, and be able to give some account of herself and the baby she carried in her arms.

"She's too old for it to be her own child. And it was dressed in fine clothes, although they were so dirty."

"Well, nurse, we'll give her another twenty-four hours," the visiting doctor said cheerfully. "But I can't have her disturbing the whole ward. I've given her bromide, and I'll see her again to-morrow. Perhaps then she will be able to tell us something about herself and where she comes from. There were a lot of Irish over for the harvest. She may have been left behind."

No one connected her with the great house, with Marley

Court, or dreamed the child she carried was grand-daughter to Lady Grindelay.

Biddy had a fine constitution for all her drinking habits and the pitch to which they had brought her. When her brain began to clear she held her tongue and pretended to have lost her memory.

"Don't be moidering me," she would say, when they questioned her. She was quite cunning and full of blarney. She had money with her, wrapped up in the corner of an old red handkerchief.

"It's grateful I am for all your kindness; I won't be troublin' much longer. I'm feelin' much stronger this afternoon."

Ten days she had lain in delirium, and at first was too weak to put her feet to the ground. They brought her the baby, but she could hardly hold it.

"I'll be betther whin I've tasted the air. Will ye hould her for me, an' let me get out for a spell?"

They would not at first, but afterwards they yielded to her desire to try the strength that was returning. They kept the handkerchief with the money, as well as the baby, hostages, as it were. The rules of the new hospital at Marley were not nearly so inelastic as those at London—Guy's or St. Thomas's, for instance.

"She can keep the bed for a day or two. Let her go out for an hour since she's so anxious for air. A queer old thing! She can't get any drink if you don't let her have her money. She won't beg, she's not that sort."

The first day Biddy had permission to go out she came back to the hospital in less than an hour. She had had to cling to the railings, and recognised her own weakness. They let her keep her bed; there was no other applicant, and her case interested them. The baby, too, through cold or exposure, developed iritis and justified itself as an in-patient.

The day Biddy Malone felt equal to the purpose that had brought her to England was just three days before the one on which Desmond and Eunice were to be married. Biddy knew nothing of the marriage. She thought Desmond was

already married to the mother of the child that had been sent to her to care for. She had no doubt it was a secret marriage, that he feared his mother's anger. There was nothing too bad or too incredible for Biddy to think of Lady Grindelay.

"I'll not be trustin' the child to her, she'd be for makin' away wid it. It's Mr. Desmond himsilf I've got to see. He'll be wantin' his child, an' the mother of it in hidin' belike."

Her brain was still not very clear, but something of this sort was in her mind. The day of the procession she had the baby in her arms, and tried to hold it up for Desmond to see, but the crowd prevented her; she had fought with them and been knocked down. To-day she was quite sober, although a little weak.

As she turned into the High Street, the carriage and pair from the Court came past, the old-fashioned barouche with its greys, the coachman and footman on the box, with their early Victorian hats adorned with gold braid and acorns. They were driving slowly, but their slow drive took them out of her sight before she had done more than see her "bhoy," and with a "foine young lady" by his side. She started to run after them, but tripped and nearly fell.

"Where are you going to, mother?" A kindly young milkman held her up; the cans in his cart jingled, but the pony stood still. "You nearly went under their feet. Lucky for you I'd just got out. You mustn't run about the roads like that."

"An' who was ut that was passin'? Shure an' didn't I see him with her by his side?" She gasped out her inquiry, she was quite oblivious of her danger from the horses' hoofs. "Young man, can ye say who it moight be?" She was almost dignified, although anxious, laying hold of his arm.

"You must be a stranger in these parts, or you'd have known that was the Court carriage, the young lord in it, and her he's to wed on Thursday."

"To wed is ut?"

"Where have you come from not to know?"

"An' where'll they be goin' to now?"

Her Irish wits were returning to her; the young man was stolid and slow in comparison.

"Going to?"

"Where will they be drivin'?"

"How should I know? To the station most likely."

"An' they'll be comin' back this way?"

"What a one you are with your questioning. What other way could they come?"

He got into the cart again, gathering up the reins, making a noise the pony seemed to understand.

"I'd advise you to keep on the pavement," he called out. And then "Milk ho! Milk ho!" came from him monotonously.

Biddy Malone stood stock still where he had left her, a tall, rather picturesque figure in her shawl and uncovered head. She took his advice about the pavement for the moment, but she meant to go back into the road later.

"Cock him up, indade! He'll be seein' me a long way off. An' she—she'll be glad to be hearin' of her baby, an' seein' it, maybe; if that's hersilf wid him! An' what for are they wantin' to kape it quiet. 'Tis something that ould divil's up to, belike. But I'll hear what my bairn says. Maybe he knows nothin' at all about it, and ut's a conspiracy."

The carriage was on its way to the station as the milkman had surmised. There was no Madame Pariset for Desmond, to come down and fit him with clothes for his wedding journey. Desmond was going up to town for a final trying on, and Eunice was seeing him off. He was not coming back until the next day. There was a bachelor dinner to be given, a farewell dinner.

"I'll get the fitting through this afternoon, and catch the 9.40 to-morrow morning. I grudge every minute I'm away from you," he said, with one foot on the step of the railway carriage.

"It will be the last time," she reassured him, smiling, blushing. "It's only for a few hours," she said again, after that long, last kiss.

But she felt, as she went out of the station, that the hours

would seem too many. Of course, Desmond must give this dinner party. It was to men he had been with in South Africa, his brother officers, school friends. Jimmy Thwaites was to be the guest of the evening. Eunice, as she drove off, pictured Jimmy being carried to his seat at Desmond's right hand. Her heart was warm to Desmond for having insisted on it. It was so like him. She was still thinking of Desmond and his many perfections as she drove down Marley High Street. The horses were pulled up with a jerk, the footman jumped down and came to her side.

"Beg pardon, miss, but there's a woman in the road. She won't move."

"Won't move! Where is she?"

"It's here that I am." Biddy answered for herself. When she had achieved her object, and stayed the progress of the carriage, she came slowly to the door. "It's mesilf that's here."

And then, for Eunice was gazing at her in surprise, and the footman was waiting for instructions, she added:

"I'm thinkin' ye'd like to have a word wid me."

"Do I know you? I seem to know you," Eunice asked wonderingly.

"It's Biddy Malone I am, from away over."

"Then I was right, after all; you were in the crowd that day. You are Desmond's old nurse?"

She leaned forward impulsively, the encounter seemed quite natural to her, natural, too, that Biddy should want to see her nursling now that he had become a hero.

"He has just gone up to town. I am so sorry. I know he would have wished to see you."

She would have liked to have bidden her get in, driven her to the Court, there to await Desmond's return, but she remembered how strange her aunt had been about this woman, and hesitated. Biddy saw the first impulse and the hesitation.

"Won't ye be gittin' out?" she wheedled, adding in a low voice: "There's somethin' I'm wishful to be tellin' ye."

There was only one person in the world for Eunice. This old woman had nursed him when he was a baby, been with

him all through his early years. Eunice was never tired of hearing about Desmond and those early years.

"I should love to hear. You can drive on, John. Pick me up at Layton's; I shall have tea there."

Layton's was the principal confectioner's in the town. Eunice and Desmond often went there for tea or ices. John thought it was rather "a rum go" to take the old woman with her, but charity covers a multitude of eccentricities.

Neither John nor the coachman recognised Biddy.

"Spun her a tale no doubt. It's no concern of ours," the coachman said, when John repeated that it was "a rum go." "She's growing like her aunt. Any beggar can get hold of them if they go the right way to work. We'll get along to the 'Arms.'"

Biddy stalked, tall and picturesque, by Eunice's side.

"We'll not be talkin' just yet," she said mysteriously.

Eunice was in no hurry.

"You'll have a cup of tea with me, and tell me all you can remember. He is coming back to-morrow. You want to see him, don't you? He has never forgotten you. Where are you staying? Why haven't you been up before?"

"Is ut to the Court I'd be comin' to see hersilf?"

Eunice had no thought of disloyalty to her aunt, but she knew Lady Grindelay was a little hard on the outside, and was deemed intolerant by those who did not know her.

"She would have understood you wanted to see him again, and arranged something. I'll tell her when I go home."

"You'll be tellin' her!"

Biddy stopped still in her astonishment.

"She won't mind," Eunice answered confidently. "Here's Layton's. We'll go upstairs, there is a nice quiet room. You'd like eggs with your tea, wouldn't you?"

She gave her order. They knew her quite well at the shop, and asked after Lady Grindelay, and if her health was keeping up.

"This is Lord Grindelay's old nurse. We are going to have tea together. She has come all the way from Ireland to see him. Mind you send us up a nice tea."

Biddy followed Eunice upstairs slowly. She was shrewd, and began to have her doubts. Eunice looked very young in her light clothes and wide hat; kindness was in her blue eyes and fresh young voice, she seemed frank, not as if she had a secret to hold.

In the quiet room upstairs, with its white-topped tables, whilst they waited for their tea to be brought, Eunice began at once to question Biddy.

"Tell me everything you remember about him. Begin at the beginning, when he was quite a tiny baby."

"Is ut of Mither Desmond, God bless him, ye're wantin' me to tell ye?" Biddy said slowly.

"Who else should it be?" Eunice laughed merrily. "Here comes the tea; they haven't kept us waiting long, have they? I'm going to wait upon you, to pour out. I expect the scones will come later; they're cooking them. You'll begin with the bread and butter." Eunice knew how the old women at Little Marley liked their tea. "I'm just going to sit and listen, you must do all the talking."

She had no misgiving. This was something of an adventure, something to tell Aunt Agatha over dinner, something to chaff Desmond about. She would hear when he first spoke, and the things he said, anecdotes of his babyhood.

"Go on, I want to hear everything. I recollect how disobedient he was, and that my nursie called him 'a limb.' He began to ride when he was three years old, didn't he? You must have been afraid every time he was out of your sight." She was encouraging her to talk.

Biddy stirred her tea, and poured it out into the saucer slowly.

"Go on," said Eunice; "begin."

"Is ut of Mr. Desmond ye want to hear? Not her I've brought wid me?"

"Whom have you brought with you? No, of course not; it's only of Desmond. Is Larry with you? Desmond has told me about Larry."

"It's not Larry I've got wid me. Is it you that's goin' to marry himsilf in three days time, thin?"

"Yes."

"An' your aunt, her up at the house, she's led ye on to ut?"

"She is quite pleased."

"I recollect now. It's you was the child in the white frock, her that had never got to get her feet wet, that stood before my lambeen bawn, before the own son of her."

The old woman raised her voice. Eunice thought she seemed to be angry, and tried to soothe her.

"But all that's a long time ago. Desmond comes first now."

"Ah, does he? An' she's made up this foine match betune yez, forcin' him to ut belike?"

The old woman certainly seemed angry. She was not drinking her tea, but sat staring at the girl, her dark eyes fierce.

"She is not forcing him to it," Eunice answered, smiling, dimpling, but a little afraid nevertheless, wondering whether she had been too impulsive, now that it was too late, wondering if her guest were drunk or mad, whether anyone would come if she called. The thought of the scones comforted her; they would be here soon, and Mrs. Layton, stout, motherly Mrs. Layton, with them.

"He wants to marry me. You mustn't think auntie has arranged it."

"An' how about his wife an' child? How about his wife an' child?" Biddy asked fiercely. She banged the table with her fist. "Tell me that. What's to become of the child? Is ut the dirty suck she'll be puttin' on ut?"

Of course she was mad, stark, staring mad. Desmond's "wife and child!" The phrase flushed her. She was so soon to be Desmond's wife. The mere thought of a child, a baby, Desmond's and hers, brought the flush hot, and she made no answer to this mad woman. Now she only wanted to get away from her.

"I'll go down and see Mrs. Layton myself, she is such a long time coming."

She rose, but Biddy rose with her, tall and menacing.

"You'll not lave this room. I don't belave ye know a

word about it. You've got to hear. An' to think of the wickedness of her! An' him with a wife an' child already."

Biddy was pouring out fierce, incoherent words.

"Let me go, you are making a mistake, you must tell him to-morrow."

Eunice was startled and alarmed, did not know what to say, how to make her escape. Of course the woman was mad. She ought to have known it before, when she saw her standing in the road.

"You think you're the first wid him; that ut's his wife ye'll be!" Biddy spoke more slowly now, and with less incoherent vehemence. She could see well enough now that it was news she was breaking to the girl. "The wickedness of ut! You that's little more than a child yersilf! They haven't tould ye a word about ut, nor Desmond himsilf belike. I misdoubted whin there was no word of ut in his letter. Ye don't belave what I'm tellin' ye? An' haven't I got the bit uv writin' in me pocket?" She produced a worn letter. "Here, take ut, an' read for yersilf."

Because now she was more than a little frightened, not at what she was saying, but by the woman herself, this mad Irishwoman, and did not wish to irritate her further, Eunice put out her hand for the paper. Her eyes fell perfunctorily on the page, the letter could be no concern of hers. But her eyes having fallen on the page remained there, fastened on it.

"This is to Biddy Malone, Desmond's old nurse. *I am sending you his baby as he desired. You're to care for and keep it until either or both of us come back from South Africa. The woman who brings him to you can stay a night or two I suppose. She's an old friend of mine, and I've given her all instructions.*

"(Lady) Gabrielle Grindelay."

"*Gabrielle Grindelay!*"

Eunice's eyes clung to the page, coming away slowly.

"An' what do ye think now?" Biddy said triumphantly.

"It isn't true!" Eunice answered unsteadily. "I know it isn't true."

"Perhaps ye'll be readin' it agin."

"It isn't true; you're a wicked woman. No, I don't mean that, but you've been deceived."

There was a constriction in her throat, and she felt as if she would like to cry. She had not known there were such wicked people in the world. The full sense of the letter had hardly come to her, but she was ashamed, as if she had stumbled into something unclean, and shocked, but, above all, incredulous. She wanted to get away from this old woman and her dreadful words, her stupid letter.

"Not thrue, thin, is it? An' her the livin' image of her feyther. Do ye remimber the curly head ov him, and the bonnie blue eyes? I've the child wid me at the hospital. Perhaps ye'd like to see her. She's not so big, but she's the mole on her arm an' all, the livin' image ov him, the darlint."

"Be quiet, be quiet. I won't listen."

She felt she must get away, out of the room, away from the shop, away from this disreputable old woman and the horrible things she was saying.

"It's no marriage at all ye're goin' through," Biddy said solemnly. "I don't know what lies they've bin tellin' you nor him. He'll be thinkin' he's free, surely; it's not him that ud be playin' the trick on ye."

Mrs. Layton came in with the hot scones and stopped short at the door. Eunice was white and her eyes were frightened. Mrs. Layton had known Eunice since she was a child; she put the plate down and went to her.

"Why, Miss Eunice!" She looked suspiciously at Biddy. "What's she been saying to you? Is anything the matter?"

"There's nothing the matter." The girl held up her head and maintained her courage. "What she's been saying to me has to be proved." She met Biddy's eyes and went on defiantly: "She has told me a story, and I am going to see if it is true."

"It's thrue enough," Biddy put in.

Mrs. Layton stood irresolutely.

"I never did hold with them Irish," she said.

Eunice felt that it was for Desmond she was fighting.

The room was very dark and swaying about her, and inside she was trembling. But now it seemed to her that she must fight for Desmond, for his honour. Someone had been writing lies about him, wicked, incredible lies. He would not be back until to-morrow to defend himself, but she would defend him.

"I will drive back with you to the hospital and see this child. You will have to give me that letter. I can't think who wrote it; it must have been some wicked, *wicked* woman. There is no other Lady Grindelay but Aunt Agatha."

The carriage was already outside; she heard it drive up, saw it from the window. The back of the coachman gave her confidence, a sense of solidity came back to her, the room ceased to sway.

"If you have finished your tea," she said to Biddy, all her young dignity in arms, "we will go now."

Already she was imagining herself telling Desmond of this, saying: "Of course I never believed a word of her story, never for a single instant."

The stairs were uneven and close, and the shop smelt intolerably warm and nauseating. She was glad to find herself in the carriage, with Biddy beside her.

Biddy sat with set face, malice or triumph in the dark eyes. It was of Lady Grindelay she was thinking, "the foine English lady who had thought herself too good for them all at Languedoc!" Whatever she had meant to do, she, Biddy Malone, would get even with her now.

"Was she thinkin' me such an ownshuck that it was easy to throw dust in me eyes?" she thought.

"To the hospital, to Marley Hospital," Eunice told the footman.

"I think you ought to give me that letter," she said, after they had been driving a few minutes, when the air had revived her.

"I'll give it up to thim as had it wrote to me."

"You'll give it up to—to Lord Grindelay?"

"He'll not be wantin' it," she answered dryly. "It's him'll be knowin' what's inside."

Eunice did not speak again; she could not.

When they got to the hospital, Biddy got out nimbly.

"You bide there, I'll bring her to you."

Eunice was glad to be alone, if one can apply such a word as gladness to the state of her mind. She knew that it was all untrue, that there was not a word of truth in what had been told her. But for all that, the wild beating of her heart had given her a dreadful pain in her back, her limbs were trembling, and she felt sick and faint, almost incapable of movement. If anyone she knew passed her she would be unable to speak to them or explain. She knew she was being a coward, that she would not feel like this if she were not a coward. Yet she held on to her faith like a heroine. "Not a word of it is true, I can tell him I knew that all along," she kept saying to herself.

Biddy reappeared.

"They won't let me bring her out. You'll have to come in."

Lady Grindelay subscribed generously to the Marley Hospital, but Eunice had never been there. From all sickness and sorrow, from pain and the knowledge of it, Agatha had protected the girl. Matron and nurses glanced at her when she went through. Her head was erect, but her face pale. Perhaps they wondered or surmised a story; not the true one, but a story.

"Here she is, thin."

Eunice sat down on the chair beside the cot; she was unable to stand. The baby lying in the cot had blue eyes, and dark hair like Desmond's. They were Desmond's eyes that looked at her or at Biddy. Eunice was not going to faint; she forgot everything else now but that she must not faint. Biddy took the infant up in her arms.

"Look at the darlint now, an' the bright blue eyes of her!"

"You must not do that." The nurse came forward. "She must stay in her cot."

"Arrah thin, an' don't be interferin' wid me." Certainly there was a note of triumph in her voice. "I'm showin' the lady the birth mark of her." She pulled up the sleeve of the pink flannel nightgown. "On the inside of the arm now.

An' another she's got on her leg, an' your afther tellin' me she's not belongin' to his lordship!"

Eunice was of high heart and courage. She had made up her mind to believe nothing. All the time it was in her mind that she would be able to tell him she had believed nothing. But the blue eyes, and now the little mole on that baby arm . . .

When Desmond rowed and she steered for him she had seen just such a one. Now she heard the plashing of the oars, the sound of many waters in her ears, she thought she was drowning.

When she recovered consciousness, in not more than a few seconds, she was lying on the floor, and the matron was kneeling beside her.

"Give me those smelling salts! Don't be frightened, my dear, lie still; you only came over a little faint. It's the first time you've been in a hospital, perhaps? You'll be all right in a minute or two."

She looked such a child, her face and lips had grown chalk-coloured, her lips trembled, but she did not answer.

"Fetch up Dr. Reid. He is still downstairs," the matron said hurriedly to one of the sisters.

Eunice managed to say that she did not want a doctor, that she was getting better. A little colour was coming back to her cheeks, and she tried to get up.

"Drink this, drink it up; it won't harm you."

The matron gave her sal volatile, and she took it gratefully. Now she felt only that nobody must know. Some terrible disgrace had fallen upon them, upon them all. For the moment she could hardly remember what it was. She wanted to get home, to be with Aunt Agatha. Nobody must ever know. She could not collect her thoughts, but Biddy, with the baby in her arms, spoke to her again.

"Ye'll belave it now," she said. "Mind ye, it's not him I'm blamin'."

"Make her be quiet!"

She did not know to whom she was speaking, but she

knew she would faint again if another word was said, she could not bear another word.

"Make her be quiet," she said again, with her white lips.

The matron told Biddy to be silent, spoke to her sharply. The scene drew wondering eyes, the matron was aware of it, and half-led, half-carried the girl to her own sanctum.

Eunice was grateful for the quiet. She felt extraordinarily shaken and ashamed, the vertigo preventing her thinking clearly.

"You are coming round nicely now."

"You—you won't let her come in!"

"Nobody can come in here; you lie down a bit on the sofa. You're coming round, getting better, you know. Did she startle or frighten you? We don't know anything about her here. She was brought in the day Lord Grindelay came home."

Eunice shut her eyes.

"That's right, rest. You would feel quite different if you could sleep for five minutes. Come a long way, have you?"

Quite a capable and good woman this hospital matron, but on fire with curiosity, simply on fire with it.

"I want to get home," Eunice said piteously, after a few moments. She found herself crying, tears oozing through her shut eyes. She wanted her aunt; nobody but Aunt Agatha could tell her what to do. To this girl Lady Grindelay must have been something of a mother, for now all she wanted was the shelter of her arms, to creep into them, whisper her dreadful story, be told that the meaning of it was not what it seemed.

CHAPTER XXVI

LADY GRINDELAY was just coming out of the hot-house, wrapped in a shawl, with Reynolds as well as Sanders in attendance. There was no doubt now about the *Odontoglossom*; the plant was full of spikes, the miracle had come to pass. For years they had thought it dead; then it seemed to be only asleep. Every spring after that there was sap in the stem; with the winter the living moisture dried up. Now, all at once there was definite promise of flower.

"It will be in full bloom for the wedding," she was saying to Sanders when the carriage stopped at the lodge.

"In blue flower, such a sight as never was seen," Sanders answered, almost awed at the greatness of their good fortune. "There's not another specimen in England." Sanders was growing old, as she was herself. He was garrulous about his successes, and detained her to talk of them. He had had many prizes and triumphs, but this would top them all.

"I hear the carriage returning with Miss Eunice; I will tell her at once. There may be a spray, perhaps, to lay on the wedding cake."

That something was wrong she knew in a moment. Intuition told her even before she saw the matron in her nurse's bonnet beside Eunice in the carriage coming up the drive.

"There has been an accident! *My son!!*"

Sanders put out an arm, but Reynolds was before him.

"Don't you agitate yourself, milady; she is sitting upright. It can't be anything. I'll go."

Reynolds thought of nothing but her mistress; she tried to keep her back.

Reynolds was beside the slow-moving carriage, the matron was already explaining, before Lady Grindelay, proceeding more slowly, got up to them.

"It's all right; there has been no accident," Reynolds called out.

"It was the first time she had been in a hospital," the matron told Reynolds. "She fainted right away. I thought it better to bring her home myself."

"It was very kind of you to do so. We will take charge of her now; I am sure it is nothing." Lady Grindelay heard the explanation and replied with dignity.

She pretended to believe that a first visit to a hospital had brought that seared and piteous look into the girl's eyes.

"Auntie," the voice was tremulous, appealing. If the matron was curious, Lady Grindelay did not intend that her curiosity should be satisfied. She knew Reynolds was to be trusted. She directed her to take the matron away to the morning-room, and look after her. Her own curiosity or anxiety could wait. Waiting is a lesson old people have learned.

"We will go into the drawing-room. You shall tell me what has happened." She spoke soothingly; she saw the girl had been badly frightened or shaken, not hurt.

"Can't we be alone, auntie? We must be alone."

Now she was in the drawing-room, no one there but herself and her aunt.

"Don't try to talk yet."

"Auntie!" She did not know how to begin.

"I am here beside you."

"You won't leave me?"

"Of course not."

Now that she was lying on the sofa, with Aunt Agatha beside her, Eunice began to feel better. She had never fainted before.

"It was so dreadful." She put out a shaking hand, and Agatha took it, held it in her own that had suddenly grown chilled.

"Perhaps it will not seem so bad when you have told me."

"I can't tell you, I can't ever tell you."

"Something has shocked or alarmed you?"

The girl was ashamed to speak. It could not be what she thought or feared. She hardly knew what she feared. Auntie would know, but could she tell her—could she?

"There is no hurry."

Agatha kept herself well in hand, although already she was afraid, desperately afraid.

"It was after Desmond left you——?"

Eunice answered, after a pause:

"Yes."

What a long time it seemed—what a long time since she had stood on the step of the railway carriage to kiss Desmond good-bye!

"After you left Desmond——"

"Yes."

"Someone met you, or spoke to you—frightened you?"

A fear of the truth came to her, not the whole truth, but a fear that from the quarter she had dreaded trouble it might have come. Where the pain in her side was always, it deepened; the fear seemed to fasten there like the teeth of a rodent. It was hard to sit upright, hard not to call out. For such pain as this she had her morphia draught; but she must not move or leave the girl until she knew the truth. Eunice had said they must be by themselves. Not even Reynolds must come with the draught until she had heard what it was.

She had not long to wait. Once Eunice began she could not leave off, pouring out a torrent of words, holding on to Agatha's skirt presently as if she had been a child again, hiding her face in her skirt.

"Of course I don't believe it. I know it could not be true. I don't know why I fainted. I don't believe a word of it. Desmond could not have a wife, and—and a child, could he, auntie? Why does it look like him? What does it mean? Be angry with me; tell me I ought not to have listened. As I'm telling you it is all becoming unreal. Desmond has never loved anybody but me, never. He couldn't have, could he? Why am I shaking with terror? Why aren't you answering?"

Agatha put her hand to her side where the pain was.

"You don't think you could ring for Reynolds, do you?" She spoke faintly. Eunice caught a glimpse of her face, got quickly to her feet and to the bell.

There was silence until Reynolds came running; the

draught was quickly administered. Lady Grindelay stayed quietly in her chair, detaining Eunice, sending Reynolds away again quite soon.

The draught did its work. Eunice had hardly time to be frightened. Reynolds was a soothing and tactful person; there never had been, and never will be again, a maid like her. She knew there was something lying between these two just now, that Lady Grindelay needed strengthening for it, and that she must leave them alone.

"I am all right now, or I shall be in a few minutes. Do not go, Eunice; do not be afraid—it is nothing. What you have told me startled me a little, that was all. Reynolds may go. Lie down again; I shall be able to talk to you in a minute or two."

Lady Grindelay sat still until the morphia began to do its work; thinking what to tell the girl, how much, or how little. In three days she would be Desmond's wife—in less than three days. It was she who had insisted upon secrecy, and brought them to this pass. She only thought now how to satisfy Eunice without injuring Desmond in her eyes.

"There is certainly some truth in the story Desmond's old Irish nurse has told you," she began.

"Some truth!"

Beside her aunt, in this quiet drawing-room, Eunice had begun already to discard, to disbelieve the story. Now the colour flooded her, and her heart began pounding again.

"You will be married to him soon now; perhaps it is as well you should know. You must listen sympathetically, try to understand. Boys and men are not sheltered like girls in their homes. They have temptations; there are bad women in the world—women with whom you have never been brought into contact."

"But Desmond, *Desmond!*"

Poor Agatha felt the difficulty, the impossibility of explaining what she herself so little understood. Yet she had to explain.

"Desmond met one of these bad women—one of the worst of them——"

"Is it true that Desmond is married? It isn't true. *Married!*" Her eyes were piteous with incredulity, bewilderment.

"No, it is not true; of course it is not true," Agatha answered dully. "Since you and Desmond are to be married in three days' time!"

The colour rushed hot to the girl's cheeks, and she was ashamed even to face her aunt because she had asked such a question. She was on her knees now, her face in her aunt's lap. Lady Grindelay strove for the right words, the words that would explain and at the same time exonerate him.

"It is dreadful—but not as bad as you think."

"It was not—it was not his baby?" Eunice stammered out.

"There comes a time when a girl has to learn of such things, of the difference in men's temperaments from ours." The poor woman remembered how she had learnt it, with how little knowledge or preparation. "I have tried to keep you ignorant, innocent; perhaps I have succeeded too well. You must not take it hardly; you are not thinking unkindly of Desmond, are you? You know how much he cares for you; he told me so when you were little more than a child. You were then, you are now, so much more to him than I am——"

"It was not his?" Even the delicate ears were crimson, and the words were breathed, hardly spoken.

"It may be; it is possible." Agatha could not answer more definitely. It was difficult to answer at all.

"You must not judge him without knowing more."

She paused. Some of her life she must unveil—the desecrated places.

"Desmond has not been unfaithful to you. This happened at the time when he had no hope of winning you, when I was standing between you. During my own married life I learnt that wives have to be tolerant——" But she had not been tolerant, and hardly knew how to urge it.

Eunice could not bear to hear the words to which she was listening.

"You—you knew!" It was incredible, worse than everything else.

"It has to be forgotten. We never meant you to hear of it."

"Desmond never meant that I should know?" Her voice was strangled.

"No; we thought it better. It is an ugly story, and I have tried to keep the ugliness of the world from you. The woman and her child have been provided for. If Biddy came here to make trouble between you two, she must not succeed. She must be sent away again at once, the child with her, before Desmond comes back. Nothing must come between you two any more," she said slowly. The drug was working.

Eunice got to her feet. She looked pale, and she could not speak. She was overwhelmed, she still felt sick, but no longer faint.

Lady Grindelay went on:

"That is right; you must be brave. It has been a shock to you; it was a shock to me when I first heard. If you must speak to Desmond, wait until after you are married, until after Thursday. You will understand better when you are a married woman; you can hardly mention it to him until then. He will be distressed to learn you know, and I am sure you would not wish to distress him. They shall be sent back. You must not think of it again; there are such stories in most men's lives. Desmond was hardly to blame, it . . . it is the woman's child."

Very white were Eunice's lips.

"And—and Desmond's?" she asked.

"You must forget it."

"I shall never be able to forget."

Agatha was getting a little drowsy.

"He will explain everything after you are married."

Eunice's lips trembled.

"I can't marry him. You know I can't marry him, after this," she broke out desperately.

Her aunt did not know it.

"Yes, you will, it must not make any difference. I can't talk to you—not just now, but you must be guided by me. The fault was mine; I stood between you——"

"Desmond himself is standing between us."

She knelt again suddenly.

"Auntie, I haven't got anybody but you. Help me. Send me away somewhere; let me go. I can't meet him, I don't know what to say to him."

"Don't say anything."

"Oh, I must—I must."

"You will forget it. You will be as happy as ever in a few days, happier than you have ever been."

"It is impossible—you must know it is impossible! Oh, auntie, help me! I don't even want to see him."

"You must say nothing, think nothing, feel nothing, until after Thursday."

"Not on Thursday, at least not on Thursday," the girl said wildly. "I—I can't bear it."

Agatha struggled against her drowsiness; she sat bolt upright. The pain that the morphia smothered had been very bad, almost unbearable, a death pang, perhaps. She must see everything right between them before she went; repair her mistakes. The wedding must not be postponed, not on any account. Her anxiety mastered pain and drug. She wanted to speak firmly, but to the girl she seemed to speak harshly, inexorably.

"Nothing must prevent the wedding taking place on Thursday."

CHAPTER XXVII

PERHAPS Lady Grindelay was too old to realise what a girl feels when she sees sin for the first time; not vaguely and far off, as kneeling in church and praying to be forgiven for something that is only a word; but close and concrete, outraging and shocking delicacy. Perhaps Agatha's experiences with Lord Grindelay had unconsciously, and notwithstanding herself, coarsened her a little, so that she did not see how such a thing as this would appear to a girl like Eunice.

Eunice made no further appeal. Agatha drowsed a little in her easy chair in the drawing-room. When she roused herself, to find Reynolds waiting to take her to bed, the girl had gone.

"Where is she?"

"Miss Eunice? She has gone to her own room. She'll come and say good-night to you when you are settled up."

She came. Her good-night was close and tender, more, not less, loving than usual. Agatha detained her.

"You are going to do what I tell you?"

Eunice kissed her again, but her manner was evasive.

"Can't Desmond's baby come here? You say that—that the mother left it, will not come back, isn't good or—or true. But the baby is not wicked——"

The big bedroom was very dark and quiet, and Agatha could not see the pale determination of the girl's face nor the likeness to herself that showed now strongly upon it.

"It ought to come here," she continued.

Agatha was as sure as that once; Agatha, too, had been certain that right and wrong were colours as clear as black and white, that there were no greys nor drabs nor indefinite, indecipherable shades in either.

"It is your children who must be here—yours and Desmond's," she answered. "But do not let us talk about it any more," she added, as if the matter were closed, as if, when she was satisfied, Eunice must also be.

The exertion of coming upstairs had restarted the rodent; again the teeth were gnawing, and she wished the girl to go so that she might groan, so that she need not hide her pain.

"We will talk of it again, when you come home from your honeymoon. I thought like you once."

"It isn't right."

"Leave me to know best, to act for the best."

Eunice kissed her again, and left her afterwards without another word.

That night, for the first time, the morphia failed, and at two in the morning Dr. Reid was summoned.

"She is taking the most terrible risks," he told Reynolds before he went upstairs. "The operation should have been done last week, when she was in town. I have never seen such obstinacy." Such courage, he meant, for he knew the reason for it.

"You will have to patch me up until after the wedding," she gasped, even to-night. "You must keep me going until after Thursday."

He said he would do his best. His best sent her to sleep about six in the morning, and the orders were that she was not to be disturbed for anything.

Eunice came irresolutely to the door about half-past eight, stood outside, listening. There was no one to see her. She knelt before the shut door, and sent a kiss or a prayer through; her throat was contracted with the sob she held back.

"Good-bye, auntie, good-bye!" she whispered. "I must go—I must."

She went along the drive presently, one of the gardener's boys carrying a bag or parcel for her. But there was little unusual about that; there were always parcels going to Little Marley or to the Guild in London.

The order had been given overnight, and when the carriage went to the station at eleven to fetch Desmond, Agatha was still sleeping. But she heard it return. The first words she spoke showed she had wakened with her mind alert.

"That is the carriage coming back from the station. Are

you there, Reynolds?" The room was still in darkness. "I am very thirsty. I am sure he gave me too much morphia. Get me something to drink—tea, or lemonade, or ice. But look out of the window first; tell me if they have come back together. Did she go to the station to meet him? I want to see him. I shall get up presently. Have you anything to drink there?"

The lemonade was by her side. Reynolds handed a feeding-cup to her before doing anything else, and she drank thirstily.

"Do you see them?"

When Reynolds pulled aside the blind, whoever had occupied the carriage was already out of sight; the carriage was empty.

"Find out, will you? Find out if they came back together."

It needed all Reynolds's tact and intelligence when she returned from her errand to keep back the result from her mistress. Young Lord Grindelay had come back alone, and he was fretting and fuming, questioning everybody to know what had become of Miss Eunice, why she had not been at the station, where she was to be found. Already there was doubt in the air of the house—uncertainty; it was extraordinary how quickly the household knew that there was something wrong.

"Miss Eunice went to meet him; she went quite early," was all Lady Grindelay heard until she had been given her breakfast. She insisted then upon getting up and dressing. Reynolds stood waiting upon her, not arguing or contradicting, for she knew it would be no use.

"Only one day more," Lady Grindelay said; "you won't have to worry about me after that." She knew by the way Reynolds was looking at her that she showed the effort it was to stand up and dress, to sit in her chair before the glass and have her hair done. "After to-morrow there is only Thursday."

"If you can keep up until to-morrow," said the maid doubtfully.

"I can keep up well enough."

"You won't go out?"

"No. I'll go into the drawing-room. I suppose you will be satisfied if I lie on the sofa?"

"You'll only do that if you can't stand up!" Reynolds grumbled.

Lady Grindelay finished dressing, and then went downstairs, Reynolds carrying a shawl. She had managed to keep anyone from breaking in upon them until then. Inquiries were being made in all directions.

Miss Eunice was not at the station; she was not in the house; she had gone out early, taking a bag with her. Whispers were gathering ominously. The housemaid found a letter on the dressing-table when Desmond sent her up for the third time to see when Miss Eunice went out, whether she had on walking or garden shoes. Already he was beyond impatience. The letter was handed to him. The housemaid did not know why she had not seen it before. She added, looking at him curiously, that the waste-paper basket was full of torn papers. "Miss Eunice must have sat up half the night writing."

The letter was bulky, and when Desmond had it in his hand it seemed at once to weigh on his heart. He was walking up and down the drawing-room when Agatha came in, and he went to her swiftly.

"What does it all mean, mother? What does it mean?"

"Her ladyship has not been very well in the night." Reynolds tried to avert any shock from her, to soften or stay his unheeding impetuosity.

"Where is Eunice gone? Why isn't she here? She promised to meet me."

"Not here! Eunice not here! Where is she then?" Lady Grindelay asked. The exertion of coming downstairs had tired her, and her wish, of course, was to hide it from him. But she need not have feared; he never gave her a thought.

"She went out early. She wasn't at the station. She left a letter on her dressing-table."

"A letter? You can go, Reynolds. Give it to me."

"Mother, what does it mean?"

"Give me time, Desmond! Give me time."

"Open the letter. Perhaps there is one for me inside."

Where has she gone? Why? She can't have heard—it isn't that! Mother?"

"She heard it yesterday. I thought I made matters all right; but I've been ill." Her hand went to her side even now, and the letter dropped from it.

Desmond picked it up. He thought her maddeningly slow in opening it.

"There is one for you too." She handed it to him.

* * * * *

When Reynolds went out of the drawing-room she saw a woman standing in the hall, a woman with a baby in her arms, arguing with the butler, asserting doggedly that she would see his lordship, that she was going to sit there till he came, that she wouldn't go until she had seen him. No one had been able to manage or move her, not the butler nor either of the footmen. Reynolds coaxed her away. What those two were saying to each other she did not know, but she knew they must be undisturbed. She coaxed Biddy away from the hall, praising the baby and talking to it, promising that Lord Grindelay should not leave the house without being told.

"You come up to my room, where you can watch the front door. He's engaged now, very particularly engaged, but you shan't miss him."

While the bright-plumaged birds were flitting about in the conservatory, uttering now and again their strange cries, in the adjacent drawing-room Agatha sat upright on the sofa and read her letter. Desmond stood beside the mantelpiece and read his. Afterwards there was silence, quite a long silence, between them.

"She has left us," she said at length.

"There does not seem to be any doubt about that." Desmond's tone was very bitter. "She won't have anything to do with me." He crushed the letter in his hand, his face was very white.

He had a moment's irrational and overwhelming rage, as the young are liable to when things go badly with them or they feel they are suffering under an injustice, and it had to find vent.

"It's all your fault," he said savagely. "You wouldn't let me tell her."

He crushed the letter and spoke out of his misery and bitterness.

"She says I've deceived her. It was you made me deceive her."

"I know, I am sorry. May I see your letter?" She held out a tremulous hand for it.

He sat beside her whilst she read it, already he was ashamed of his words.

"I didn't mean that, mother. I don't know what I'm saying; I'm wild with thinking what she must have felt about it. Of course, I didn't mean to reproach you."

Agatha read the letter without answering, perhaps without hearing. That he was sitting beside her was all she knew.

"It will come right," she said, "you shall not be unhappy, I will put things right between you. Have confidence in me."

"I saw the letter your wife wrote to your old nurse before she went to you in South Africa. And I've seen your baby. You never told me about either of them. It makes no difference to me if you were not married to her; it's just the same. You were deceiving me all the time—I always told you everything, even my thoughts. I am too unhappy to write, but I never want to see you again. I could never believe anything you said. I don't want anything more to do with you."

It had been easy to write those few lines to Desmond in the white heat of her revulsion from him. But to write to her aunt had not been easy.

"You tried to keep everything from me always, but I am not so innocent or ignorant as you suppose; that's why I am going away. I couldn't bear to marry Desmond now, and I know if I stay you would persuade, or make me. You think of nothing but what Desmond wants. I am not ungrateful, I know everything you have done

for me. I don't know how to leave you, to go away. But I must. I can't meet Desmond. We've always told each other everything, that's what I thought, and this makes everything he has ever said seem untrue. Auntie dear, let me go, don't try to follow or find me. Take Desmond's baby instead—it is a darling. If I had not felt so dreadfully, I could have taken her in my arms, and kissed her, the poor little baby! She ought to be at Marley instead of me. She would be there if it wasn't because you want me to marry Desmond and live at Marley. She isn't wicked; she hasn't done anything wrong. It is all so dreadful, but the worst is about the baby. I am sure you will have her if I stay away. You'll get to care for her, like you got to care for Desmond. You care for him more than you do for me. I'm glad about that and that he loves you. I know you are ill and trying to hide it, I have known all the time how brave and great you are. But I can't stay in the same house with Desmond and his baby; the baby ought to be at Marley. This is such a stupid letter; I seem to say the same things over and over again, but I've been all night trying to write it. I wish I knew you wouldn't miss me, and then I don't wish it; I couldn't bear to be forgotten. I know it was all kept secret for my sake—by you, at any rate. I seem to understand everything and to forgive everything except Desmond. I hate even to think of him and all that we were to each other. . . .”

The letter broke off abruptly. Desmond refused to read it.

“What's the use? I don't want to read that she hates the sight of me. What am I to do? How can I make it right?”

Just as it had been necessary to vent his first anger, so now it was necessary to have a confidant for his grief. He was appealing to her, and the appeal shook her.

“I can't bear it. Mother, we must get her back, you will get her back, won't you? I must try and explain it to her.”

“I will do my best.”

“You will make her forgive me.”

"Or me! My poor son, it is all my fault. I see now, it was my mistake, not yours. I was short-sighted, impulsive, but I thought only of you—you believe that?"

"I can't bear it. What must she be thinking of me?" And she felt that a sob tore her breast. She wanted to put her arms about him, gather his head to her breast. But always her words came with difficulty. She was filled with tenderness, shaken with it, but all she got out was:

"It will all come right; it must."

"Where do you think she has gone? What are we to do?" He was ashamed of his breakdown, and got up from her side, from the sofa. "We must do something."

"Is anything known in the house?" Agatha asked.

"Jane gave me the letter, said she must have sat up all night writing. Mother, how did it all happen? How did she get to know? Who told her? It must have been someone who hated me—us. I would have told her myself one day, you know I would, when we were married. She'd have forgiven me; I know it. I'd have made her. Gabrielle is married, Michael McKay told me so last night."

"It was the child, your old nurse Biddy showed her the baby. It seems there is a likeness——"

Lady Grindelay spoke slowly, with difficulty. She found it unbearable to think it was she who was responsible for Desmond's pallor, the ravage his sudden trouble had brought upon the young face she loved. She felt that if she were in health she could comfort him, help him. If only the pain would leave off gnawing at her for a moment so that she might think!

Desmond went on unhappily:

"I know why she ran away; it isn't only my not telling her. She's got it into her head I've neglected the child, Eunice adores babies." A flush dyed his forehead. "I know what she'll have been thinking. She's right, too. Only it isn't exactly as it seems. He was exculpating himself, now he no longer wished to blame anybody else. "I never thought of it at all, that's the truth of it. When Gabrielle told me it was coming, I made her marry me. I thought I might be killed,

and then—I forgot all about it. It wasn't there, you see." He paused, and his mother watched him, following his argument, feeling with him, suffering with him. "And she never said a word about it to me when she came to Waterval. Do you think you'll ever be able to make Eunice understand?"

"You have very little for which to blame yourself," his mother answered. "I, too, never gave the child a thought; you seemed to me as if you were still little more than a boy yourself."

"Mother, help me to find Eunice, to speak to her face to face. I may be able to make her understand."

"We will find her."

"But if we can't find her?"

"Don't look so unhappy, I cannot bear it. There are only one or two people to whom she can have gone."

"You'll get her back to-day?"

"To-day or to-morrow; soon."

"To-morrow is Thursday—our wedding day! It must be to-day. You don't know how I feel about it." But his eyes and voice told her.

"I will do my best."

"I want her."

"I am afraid the wedding must be postponed," Lady Grindelay said uncertainly.

"I didn't mean that. But I must find her, see her, speak to her. Nothing ought to have prevented my telling her."

"It was all my fault. I wanted her to see you as I do now, as I ought always to have done, without flaw. My son——"

"I could have persuaded you, I can't humbug myself, I know I could have persuaded you. I didn't want to. I didn't want her to know."

After a little further talk Lady Grindelay began to plan how to account for the postponement of the wedding, what explanation must be given to the neighbourhood.

"I think it had better be given out that I have been taken ill."

He cared nothing at all for what the world might say.

"But you're not ill," he objected. "Reynolds said you had been, but that was only her fuss, wasn't it? You look all right." If he had looked at her more closely he might have thought differently. "I shall want you to help me with her." She was well enough at least to be glad he needed her help.

"How could I be ill if you need me? But I hear Dr. Reid's brougham. I think I can manage to persuade him that I am."

"It will come right, mother; say you think it will come right between us." He was so desperately in need of comfort that she had to tell him again.

"I am sure of it. Leave me now, I must talk to Dr. Reid. Don't be out of reach. Telegraph to Andrew McKay, advising him of the delay, giving my health as the reason. I don't think he will be surprised. And—and—Desmond, I think you will have to speak to this woman——"

"Biddy will do anything I tell her. If only I'd seen her before! But I can't do anything till I know where Eunice has gone, until I've seen her," he cried out. "You said she can only have gone to one or two people?"

"Hush!" For now the doctor was in the room, and Lady Grindelay was steady in her intention that no one must know what had occurred, steady in her belief that she could minimise its seriousness. "I have been telling my son of that attack last night. Do you think I am fit to go through the fatigue of the wedding? You may speak candidly. If it has to be put off, he will face it. He wants to do whatever is best for me."

"I think you ought to have been in bed the last fortnight," the old doctor answered gruffly. "You know it as well as I do. You don't mean to say you've grown sensible at last, that I can send for Sir Simeon?"

She silenced him hastily.

"We can talk about Sir Simeon afterwards. I only wanted to tell you that my son will make the sacrifice. They must have a quiet wedding later on. Shall I go back to bed again? Is that what you advise?"

"You ought never to have got up."

Desmond thought she was humbugging the doctor. That is, if he thought about her at all.

"Very well, then. Perhaps you are right; even doctors are right sometimes, I suppose. I will give in to you just this once. And Desmond"—he was leaving the room, but she called him back—"don't go away for a moment. Don't omit to wire Andrew McKay to come down. He will help you with the necessary arrangements for the postponement. And go up to the station. My niece has gone to London," she said quite calmly to the doctor; for all that her eyes and her face, to anyone who knew her, belied her calmness. "They missed each other. My son has only just returned. He caught the early train."

Desmond thought she was very wonderful; she seemed to think of everything. All he could do was to follow her instructions. She had said she was sure it would all come right, and his misery was a little assuaged by her assurance.

As he came out of the drawing-room, leaving his mother with the doctor, Reynolds met him.

"Can you come upstairs a moment?" she asked him respectfully, a little mysteriously.

"I'm just off to the station. Is it anything special? I've got a telegram to send, too."

"It is rather special, if you could spare a minute."

Reynolds was a privileged person.

"What is it?" he asked as he followed her.

She told him about Biddy and her pertinacity on the way up.

"She wouldn't go until I promised you would speak to her; it was the only way to quiet her. We don't want to set the household talking. She is in my room, if you don't mind stepping up."

"The marriage is to be put off; I suppose you've heard?" His heart was so full that it overflowed.

"It won't be for long, milord; I'm sure it won't be for long. Miss Eunice is so attached to you, if I may be allowed to say so."

"Was, you mean. Hallo!"

Biddy flung her arms about him and began to pour out a torrent of half-incoherent Irish.

"An' didn't I say you'd never be turnin' me from your door. An' me with your child in me arms. Carried her in me arms I did, ivry step ov the way, to hould her up so she should see her Da come back from the wars wid the glory on him. An' thin I heard you was to be married. I thought at first it was to the mother ov her, but sorra a bit. The wickedness of ut! Look at her!" The baby was crawling on the floor, and she caught her up. "Whin I saw what was the truth of ut, that niver a word the young lady knew, nor you belike, that maybe ye thought they were both dead—is it dead she looks, the darlint? An' where's her mother I don't know. But I brought the child to her Da, so she'll have her rights; an' I towld her, the bit ov a pale-faced girl, who ut was was the feyther ov ut. I towld ut all to her——"

"You didn't do me a good turn, Biddy."

"An' didn't I, thin? But it's sorry I am."

He turned away from her and the child, and she looked at him anxiously.

"An' will I be goin' away agin', thin, me and her. It's you that's first wid me, an' what you say I'll do, if it's trampin' the streets wid her." She was as wily as ever. "Is it goin' I'll be?" She made for the door. "An' her Da to niver so much as look at her," she said to the baby.

"Wait; don't be foolish. Of course you're not to go; you can't go like that." He was distracted; tears were not far from his eyes. "I must get off. Wait until I think. Reynolds, can they stay here? Is there anywhere I can put them until I get back?"

"An' her the image ov you. It's the cowld street he'd be afther turnin' ye into."

"Reynolds?"

"Of course, milord, if you wish it, if you think it best." Reynolds was doubtful, anxious to do what she could for him. "There are the old nurseries."

"The very thing. Take them up there. Let them stay until I come back, until I've seen my mother again."

Biddy held the child up to him as he moved to pass.

"An' won't ye take her in yer arms?"

He took the child hurriedly, and it was true that he was strangely moved. It was so small and helpless, by the contraction of his heart he knew what Eunice must have felt. Eunice! He must find her, tell her, explain.

"I must get off. Look after them until I come back," he said to Reynolds brokenly. He was not going to abandon them, to turn them into the streets; he flushed when he thought of it.

"Whatever sort of a blackguard I've been, I'm not that sort of blackguard," he thought, with that sob in his throat and strange emotion as he hurried down the stairs. How small it was, and helpless! His own child! It seemed incredible.

The next hours were spent in sending telegrams and dispatching messages in all directions. He went back to the station, and heard that Eunice had gone to town by the 10.17. Saying to the stationmaster that there had been a mistake, that they had missed each other, seemed to make it true, or possible; seemed to bridge the distance between them. Coming back he met Dr. Reid, and Dr. Reid stopped to speak to him.

"This is a great blow to you, I am afraid."

"Oh, that's all right," Desmond answered hastily.

"I have just wired for Sir Simeon Greenlees," Dr. Reid went on.

"For Sir Simeon?" Desmond stood still. "Whatever for?"

"The symptoms are becoming hourly more serious. The delay has been most unfortunate. She has been brave—too brave."

Desmond remembered in time that he must not give away his mother's secret; he must carry out her instructions. She seemed to have persuaded old Reid without any difficulty that the wedding was put off because she was ill.

He knew now Eunice had gone to London, that she was not far away. His mother would know where to look for her, to which of their friends to apply. But Desmond had a new twinge of distress in remembering that neither of them had had any intimate friends; they had only been really intimate with each other.

"I must get back, I suppose I can go up to her?"

"She ought not to be left alone. I shall send in a nurse for to-night. Reynolds can't be in attendance night and day."

Desmond was fidgeting to get away, hardly listening. Dr. Reid thought the young man callous or indifferent. He hoped his own son, Jack, would have taken the news of his serious illness differently. He was sorry for Lady Grindelay. "The war made them callous," was the excuse he found.

"You think I must have acted well?" was Lady Grindelay's comment when Desmond told her she was to have a nurse, that Sir Simeon Greenlees had been sent for! "Never mind what he said; I made the most of it. I shall have to stay in bed a few days, I suppose; I must give some colour to the story. Now, tell me your news; all you have done. You have got hold of Andrew, I see; his answer seems to have come very quickly. Have you had any lunch?"

He had forgotten lunch, but she persuaded him to eat. It was already late. He forgot also to tell her about Biddy and the baby, and that they were under the same roof with her.

"Come back to me after you have eaten," she called out to him. In truth, she could hardly bear him out of her sight. It seemed there was not so much time before her as she had supposed.

When he came up again, two steps at once, and his mouth still full, she began again about Andrew's telegram.

"What time did you telegraph to him? I see this was sent off at eleven."

Andrew had wired: "Coming by two-thirty."

"Have you ordered the carriage?"

"I told John to meet every train, to stay in Marley, put up at the Arms. I couldn't bear to think of her finding no one at the station."

"You did quite right. What time did you send that telegram to Andrew?"

"You mean—you think——" He caught her meaning quickly.

"I think he was coming down in any case, it is not your telegram that is bringing him, he has news for us. . . ." He sprang to his feet.

"Of course, you're right. What an idiot I am! Of course, that's what it is. Eunice went to him, and he's bringing her back. I'll go down and meet them. There's just time. She'll be here in less than an hour."

"Don't be too sure."

Her warning was in vain; he was already out of her reach. There was only the dog-cart in the stables, but he could get to the station in less than three-quarters of an hour.

He accomplished the task, turning in at the station as the engine, with its blue smoke, rounded the corner. The carriage was there, too, and the footman to catch the reins as they were flung to him. Desmond was on the platform when the train came in. He had buoyed himself up with hope. He felt sure Eunice would be there. And once he saw her he thought he could persuade her; that at least she would not be so hard on him. He was on fire to see her, to try to put himself right in her eyes; or, if not right, at least to make her think him less black than she thought him now. He had recovered from her letter a little; he was no longer in utter despair. He would see her, persuade her, explain.

But the lawyer got out alone. Desmond had a quick, sickening sense of disappointment.

"Eunice?" Question and answer were quite simultaneous:

"Is quite safe."

"She isn't with you?"

"No."

"Where is she?"

"With the girls and Michael at Campden Hill."

Andrew was sorry for the boy; anybody who saw his face

would have been sorry for him. Outside the station he said dully:

“The carriage is here. You don’t mind my going in the dog-cart, do you?”

“You don’t want to hear what I’ve come to tell you?”

“Not just now; not if you don’t mind.”

“I warned your mother, you know.”

But Desmond was already out of hearing.

CHAPTER XXVIII

LADY GRINDELAY bore herself badly when Andrew came to her in her room. She sent down word that he was to be brought up directly he came. She had already heard to whom the girl had gone.

"I suppose you have come to gloat over me, to say 'I told you so,' to say how wise I should have been to have been guided by you. That is what you have come to say, isn't it?" she began. He was shocked at her appearance, and answered gently, coming up to the bed, standing beside it.

"I've not come to gloat. How could you think it? I've come to see what I can do for you."

"What does she say? She has not come with you, I hear; the dog-cart got here first. Wouldn't she listen to reason?"

* * * * *

Eunice had been waiting in Andrew's office when he arrived that morning, the dingy office in Bedford Row with its law books, littered desk and faded Turkey carpet where so much big business was transacted. Michael had an appointment to see a client, and was coming down later. For half an hour Eunice sat with Andrew, telling her story. He was firm with her, hardly sympathetic, pointing out how foolishly she had acted in leaving Marley in this way. Then Michael came in, and she turned from Andrew to him.

"You said if I ever wanted help I could call on you," she burst out passionately.

And Michael, guessing at once what had come about, answered soberly but without hesitation:

"I meant what I said. Tell me what you want me to do."

Andrew, after a few words of explanation, went out and left them together. Half an hour later Michael came to him again, and, on the strength of what he told him, Andrew lost no time in looking up a train to Marley, sending his advance telegram.

"You go down, father, and tell them what she wishes."

"It is a sad business," Andrew replied.

"Eunice has appealed to me. I know she is overwrought, has not given the matter sufficient thought." Michael spoke as if he were out of breath. "I should not, of course, take her at her word, take advantage of what may be only a mood, something said in anger."

"What she said to me was that she would have nothing more to do with Desmond, that she would not go back; she was unpersuadable. Is that what she told you?"

"One must wait," Michael answered oracularly, but still in that breathless way, his face a dull red.

"She had found out, after all, that you are more reliable."

"I don't know, I think it is only her anger speaking; she is very unlike herself. It has obviously been a great shock to her. I am not going to take any advantage of it."

"You still care for her?"

"That has nothing to do with it," the dull red deepening. "All we have to think of is what is best for her. She is very agitated——" His father could see that he, too, was suffering under a great stress of emotion. "I shall do nothing hastily, not let her bind herself in any way, I think she knows what I feel about it. You will telegraph and say you are starting at once, to relieve their anxiety."

"You want me to tell Lady Grindelay everything you have just told me?"

"At any rate you must tell her that she will not come back, will not meet Desmond again."

"You'll take her up to Campden Hill when I have gone—to the girls."

"Yes."

* * * * *

Here, by Agatha's bedside, Andrew was doubtful how much or how little he should tell her. He temporised.

"She is very overwrought."

"How long does she mean to remain away?"

"I don't know; I can't say at all."

"I forbid you to harbour her."

"Don't be absurd, Agatha. You had better hear everything."

"That is what I am waiting for. The great grievance I suppose is that she was not told? She must absolve Desmond from that; he did it for me."

"That's not the great grievance; it is one of them, but not the greatest. He was callous as to the child's welfare; he made no inquiries——"

"How does she know that?"

"The old woman told her."

"Did you let her know that I paid the child's mother to look after it?"

"Did you?" asked Andrew dryly. "Did you? I thought you paid her to keep out of the way. But that's not the point, the main point. Apart from her own personal feelings towards Desmond, and naturally they are very shaken, quite altered, she tells me she feels that if she were to put them to one side, let you persuade her to such a marriage, she would come between you and your grandchild. She is quite as strong upon duty as you used to be; she thinks the baby should be here."

"Doesn't she understand the child is illegitimate? Didn't you tell her so?"

"Yes; I pointed that out to her, and she seemed to think it of no consequence. I couldn't press it; she had seen the baby, and that made all the difference. What we see is so different from what we hear."

"You ought to have brought her back with you. I could have talked to her."

"That's what she fears most, why she came away. She is so afraid you will talk her over. And she dreads seeing Desmond."

"That, at least, is a good sign. She cannot stay away altogether. Where is she now?"

"I left her with Michael. He will take her up to Campden Hill presently; the girls will look after her. They are devoted to her, you know."

"You left her with Michael?" Agatha said, her eyes doubtful.

"She asked for Michael. She didn't come to see me at all; she came to see Michael."

"You had better tell me what you have in your mind, Andrew; what you have come to tell me? I can see there is something."

"Don't you think you can guess?" He spoke quietly. "After all, it is not quite new to you."

"Go on, please go on."

"Well, if you will insist, she says that if Michael still cares for her, if Michael will take her, Desmond and Desmond's child can be at home here, where they belong——"

"*Michael!*"

"A short time ago you had no objection, you were even anxious for it. Don't get excited." For he saw how she flushed. "Michael is the best of sons; he will make her a good husband; he has always cared for her."

"For Marley!"

"That is not fair, Agatha, not true, and you know it. What I can give Michael would buy Marley and leave something over. Besides, Marley is for Desmond, for his children. Eunice is full of Desmond's child and her rights. She knows how greatly Michael has always cared for her; she offers to marry him without delay. She thinks that will make the road clear for you, and settle things here."

"You are mad, mad; all of you. Desmond will never give her up. I am not going to have him disappointed. This will blow over."

"It will have to be a strong wind to blow away the child. That's a concrete fact, you know."

"When was all this spoken of?"

"In my office this morning."

"And you have come away and left them together?"

"It was Michael sent me to you. You can trust him; he won't let her do anything rash."

"She does not know what she is contemplating. Marriage—without love!"

For an instant each of them thought of their own marriages.

"When one cannot get cake, bread is very satisfying," said Andrew dryly, quietly. "You had no appetite at all——"

"Andrew, you are playing me false; you are intriguing against me, you have always wanted Eunice for Michael."

She was becoming agitated. He could see her laboured breath, her feebleness and bad colour, that she could hardly express herself. He turned away from her, speaking huskily.

"I never wanted what you did not."

She was overcome by physical weakness, but her mind remained clear. She began again, with hardly a pause.

"It is quite true, you have been a good friend. You have been right all through." She found it hard to say it. "I have not stood alone as well as I thought. If I had only said 'Yes' to you at the beginning! But we are old people now. Andrew; I cannot die before I have seen the boy happy. I have misunderstood him, not acted in his best interests. I must make things right before I go. Help me! You see how I am, half dead already, unable to act for myself."

"I am here, Agatha," he answered quietly.

"You won't go against me."

"How can you think it?"

"Bring her back to us. She is for Desmond. Act for me—help me!"

He was greatly moved; she was so much stronger in her weakness than ever she had been in her strength.

"I will not fail you."

"You have a genius for friendship; I have always known it, a genius for friendship. You will not let all my hopes be balked?"

"I'll do my best, whatever I may think; hold a brief against my own son."

"Send for her, make her come back here at once. Michael is not like Desmond; Michael will get over it. Besides, she belongs to Desmond; they have always cared for each other—always, since they have been little children. If I had not

come between them, putting my duty to her before my duty to him. . . ."

"As long as you live you will blunder. . . ."

"That is not going to be for very long, Andrew," she answered, with her eyes closed, more quietly. "Not for long."

"Do you think that makes it any better for me?" he answered harshly.

They began to talk over what was to be done. Andrew urged that the girl should be allowed to stay at Campden Hill for the present.

"He must know where she is."

"I've already told him."

"Yes, I know, I had forgotten. I've not been as ill as this before. I was not telling you the truth when I said I was feigning, to account for the postponement of the wedding."

"I feared it."

"You will make her come back at once?"

Andrew promised that. The woman he had loved all his life lay here, old and broken, pleading with him. For her he disregarded the claims of his own son.

When he went downstairs he told Desmond briefly that Eunice wished to stay away for a time, to remain with them at Campden Hill, but that Lady Grindelay would not hear of it.

"I'll go and fetch her," Desmond answered quickly. "We can get back to-night."

"No, no! That would not be at all a good plan."

"She is too angry with me, too bitter against me?"

"You must give her time."

"If only I had told her myself," he said miserably.

"Your mother wished you to keep silent," Andrew answered briefly.

He, too, had been unable to go against Agatha's wishes; that was the trouble. Now, notwithstanding he still thought Eunice would be safer with Michael than with Desmond, he intended to carry out his promise, he meant to lose no time in returning to town, have the necessary interview with Michael,

persuade or entreat the girl to reconsider her determination, and give her aunt the opportunity to speak once more with her.

But he did not carry out his intention.

Sir Simeon Greenlees came down by the afternoon train, and Dr. Reid brought him to the Court. Dr. Reid knew of the old friendship between Lady Grindelay and the lawyer and begged him to await the result of the consultation.

"I hear that she has other anxieties now, when her mind should have been completely at ease."

Dr. Reid was even better informed than Andrew; he knew, for instance, that the child was actually in the house. His son, Jack, was on the staff of the Marley Hospital. In a small country town news spreads like fire. Jack had told him of the old Irishwoman and the baby she brought with her, of Eunice's visit to the hospital and her fainting fit. He had not to put two and two together to make four; the figures stared him in the face. Dr. Reid was too old to be curious; he remembered Desmond's father, he was neither curious nor shocked. His patient seemed the only thing that mattered just now.

"Stay until we hear what Sir Simeon thinks. I'm afraid it is too late for the operation he advised. She would not listen to him in London, insisted on waiting until the boy came home, until she had witnessed his triumphal reception here, until the wedding was over. Sir Simeon is washing his hands now; then we are going in to her. But I'm afraid it's too late." Dr. Reid was nearly eighty, and death was a familiar sight to him; but his old eyes were rheumy when he added:

"She may wish to see you again."

* * * * *

The doctors were with Lady Grindelay the best part of an hour. When they left she asked that Desmond should be sent up to her. Dr. Reid told her that the lawyer was still in the house, and she sent down word that she wished him to

remain. The doctors could talk to him, and whilst they were talking, Desmond was to come up.

"What have they told you?" was her first question to her son.

"That she's at Campden Hill."

"Oh!"

She had not meant what he had been told about the girl, but about herself. He added then, a little remorsefully:

"What did the bigwig say? Did he spot that you were putting it on a bit?"

"No—no. He didn't say that exactly. . . ."

"What did he say, then?"

"You need not believe what he says. Doctors often make mistakes—nearly always."

"He doesn't think there is anything really wrong with you, does he?"

She lay quiet a minute, and then answered:

"He thinks my time has almost come; that I am not going to get better."

"What—*what*? Mother! It isn't true—say it isn't true! I can't bear it; mother!" His voice broke, he forgot his own trouble.

"Is it such a surprise to you, then?"

He threw himself on his knees beside the bed. The soft spot in him, the Irish heart that came from Pat, cried out:

"I can't do without you! Say it isn't true!"

His words were sweet for her to hear; they were like the scent of flowers in the room, or warm, healing waters. She heard him sob as he knelt beside the bed.

"I've been such a bad son, I want to be better to you, to have time. . . ."

"You have not been a bad son. You have been one who called and had no answer; you have had a dumb mother, not deaf, but dumb. Don't cry; you must not grieve, I can't bear it; it is all right, everything is coming right for you. Tell me you know you are going to be happy when I'm gone, I must hear that. I've wronged you. . . ."

"Mother, it isn't true, *mother!*"

"Do you care? How wrong of me to be a little glad that you care. I am not going to get well, but I am not as bad as they think. I know much better than they do. I have seen death so often. This is not death; it is not very near. Before then I shall have lost hold. I have seen so many people die, and it is always the same; they let go of this world when they are in sight of the next. I have not come to that yet. I want to see you and Eunice happy before I die. I want you to go up to London and fetch her. To-morrow morning will do; there is no need for you to go to-night. Why should Andrew put my son before his own? Why should I ask it of him?"

Again she lay still. Desmond had risen to his feet; he was standing beside her now. She opened her eyes and looked at him. Tall he was, and delectable to her eyes, and the sound of his sobbing had been like violets in the room; she saw that his eyes were swollen with crying.

"My son! how good it is to see you there. I have never told you . . . my son, how much I have cared for you; heart of my innermost heart, my son. I have made so many mistakes. Forgive me, forgive me everything, Desmond!"

"Mother! You'll try and get well."

"I must see you and Eunice married before I go. She is your heart's desire, isn't she? I must give you your heart's desire."

"It's to see you better," he broke out.

"You must bring her back. Tell her, and that I want to bid her 'good-bye.'"

"Do you think she will come with me?"

"Don't leave her too long with Michael."

"With Michael?"

"Michael has always cared for her. In her anger against you she has gone to him. She must come back."

"She wouldn't look at Michael," he said hastily, as he had said once before.

"No one can tell what foolishness a girl may commit. Think what I did!"

"Eunice would never look at Michael," he repeated. He would have been angry if he had not been too unhappy for

anger. "You don't know Eunice. She may hate me, but she would never put anyone else in my place."

"So she would have said of you. 'Desmond would never look at anyone else.' Can't you hear her saying it? That is the trouble—her faith in you, now yours in her. You must go to her."

Because she wanted him here she was sending him away. She went on talking as if she were talking to herself:

"*The wheel has come full circle!* We women . . . so unfit to stand alone, so quick in seeking to cure one pain with another. I was forty, forty years of age when I married your father because Eunice's mother hurt me!"

"Eunice is different."

"We are all different and all foolish. Go now. Send Andrew to me. Keep him here to-night. When it is a question of our sons we must trust no one. . . ."

Desmond was glad to get out of the room. He thought nothing of what she told him about Eunice and Michael. Eunice and Michael! It was unthinkable. But he wanted to find someone to tell him his mother was not as ill as she thought herself, that there were years before her in which he could show his affection. He had to hope.

To Andrew she began much as she had begun to Desmond.

"They have told you, I suppose."

"They have told me."

"I have refused the operation, or to see anyone else."

"So I have heard."

"And I have told Desmond he is not to leave Eunice to you or to Michael; he is to fetch her himself; to tell her I wish to bid her 'good-bye.'"

"You might have trusted me."

"Andrew, are you crying too?"

He had kept his voice under control, but she heard the tears in his controlled voice.

"Andrew!"

"Well, well, what's the next? You wouldn't trust me to put Michael's, or my own, interests on one side, to act for you."

"You are hurt?"

"Wasn't that what you intended?"

"Andrew!"

"Yes."

He stood beside her now, looking down upon her. She was not a grey and shrunken old woman in his eyes, she was the girl he had asked in marriage, the only woman he had loved; difficult, impossible, obstinate, the Agatha who should have been his. And she looked back at him. She knew now how much his friendship had meant to her, she had ever a sense lacking, but it was not the sense of gratitude.

"I did not tell Desmond to go because I did not trust you. I gave him that reason, but it was not the true one. I wanted you beside me at the end. Will you stay with me, Andrew?"

"Thank you for wanting me."

CHAPTER XXIX

LADY GRINDELAY was right and the doctors were wrong. She was not going to die just yet. But Desmond knew nothing of that when he went up to town the next day, leaving Andrew at Marley, and uncertain what he might hear when he got back. Hopeful, but uncertain. That he was going to see Eunice again was the principal thing. However she might greet him, he was going to see her. When he remembered that but for untoward circumstances she would be already his wife, he went hot all over; she would remember it too, he knew that. His mother's illness was no longer in the foreground. He was going to give her message, tell Eunice she was dying and wished to say good-bye; but he no longer quite believed it. He had seen her this morning, and she looked much as usual.

When he got to Campden Hill he sent up his card, with the words "*I must see you*" scored and underlined.

Eunice sent back her reply verbally. She refused to see him. Mary and Martha McKay, good girls both of them, tried to get her to soften the message, to let one of them be the bearer of it, but she was inexorable. She was also frightened, but they did not know that. They had not understood why Michael had brought the girl here, or why the wedding was put off, the wedding for which their new dresses were already in the house. They were full of curiosity, of sympathy, of excitement. Eunice had not come down to dinner, she had stayed in her room until now; they were sitting there with her when Desmond's card was brought up. Michael had told them not to ask any questions. Neither Michael nor their father had slept at home last night. It was very hard not to question, but they were good girls and devoted to their brother; also to Eunice, of course. Michael had been there that morning, but he had not asked to see Eunice. He said she had better be undisturbed; they were to tell her he was coming home to lunch, that he hoped to see

her then. He showed them a paragraph in the *Morning Post* which he thought would be sufficient explanation for them. It was not, but that is an unimportant detail.

"In consequence of the alarming illness of Lady Grindelay the marriage between Lord Grindelay and Miss Fellowes is unavoidably postponed."

"But if Lady Grindelay is alarmingly ill, surely Eunice would be with her?"

"There are reasons——"

But he would not give them. He went away, saying he would be back to lunch; they were to tell Eunice so.

When Desmond heard that Eunice would not see him, he asked if Mr. Michael McKay were at home, and was almost ashamed of his question, hot for the answer, nevertheless.

"He's coming in to lunch," the maid answered, going beyond her instructions.

"Then I'll wait until he returns. Perhaps Miss Mary would see me, or Miss Martha? Otherwise I'll wait until Mr. Michael comes back."

There was no immediate hurry, for all his quick heart-beats and overwhelming impatience, Desmond knew there was no hurry. From Campden Hill to Paddington is only a few minutes, and there was no train until 2.5. "Tell her I'm not going away."

The message was brought up to the room where the three girls were sitting together. Eunice sprang to her feet, paling and startled, saying:

"Oh, he must go; tell him he must not stay here."

Martha and Mary exchanged glances.

"Shall I go down to him?"

"Or I?"

"I don't want him to meet Michael; he mustn't meet Michael," Eunice answered agitatedly. "Oh, what shall I do? Won't he go away; can't you make him go away?"

The parlourmaid stared at her; Mary and Martha, with more delicacy, looked away."

"We'll do anything you wish," they said almost simultaneously.

"I—I can't see him."

They had never heard of anything so strange.

"Michael will know what to do when he comes," they said in chorus. In that house it was an axiom that Michael always knew what was to be done in any emergency; there had been only small emergencies until this one. But Eunice knew that she did not want the two men to meet. In a sudden and unexpected revulsion of feeling she felt that she had been disloyal to Desmond. She had asked Michael to marry her, let him put his arms round her. Her cheeks flamed. All at once it seemed to her it was a dreadful thing she had done, dreadful and inexplicable. Desmond was downstairs and she could not face him. Just at that moment it was not because of what he had done, but because of what she had. She was drawn to him by cords stronger than she could resist; she had pulled against them and now fell back, trembling, unnerved.

"What am I to do?" she said again, despairingly. They heard a cab in the street; it pulled up quickly; there was the sound of a key in the latch.

"Here is Michael."

He had been unable to wait until the usual time. He had not taken her at her word yesterday, when she had thrown herself on his protection or chivalry. He had kept his self-control; he must feel sure she would not regret her impulse to come to him, that she meant she could never forgive Desmond, never look at him again. He was a man, but a chivalrous one, and he had lived without hope. He knew what she felt for her cousin; she had never disguised it from him. All night he had lain awake, thinking what it would mean to have her for his wife, to care for her. He wanted to be fair to Desmond, but he forgot Desmond once or twice in the contemplation of what might come. He thought he could make her happy; at least he would have no secrets from her. If she felt the same to-day as she did yesterday, he would take her at her word; he could resist no farther. That is what he thought when he put his latchkey in the door. She had had

time enough for thinking; he had left her alone on purpose. If she felt the same to-day he would take her at her word.

Desmond, fuming and on the watch, heard the hansom drive up as quickly as they did, and he was in the hall when Michael opened the door. All Michael's dreams were shattered when he saw Desmond. He matched himself against him in that moment, the choice was for her to make. He was not unconscious of his worth, and yet his dreams were shattered.

"You here?" he said.

"It wasn't likely I'd be anywhere else," Desmond answered.

"She won't see you."

"She will have to see me."

Michael hung up his hat mechanically.

"If she does not wish to see you, you cannot force her."

"Can't I? You see if I can't." It was not the way he had meant to speak, but Michael's quietude and assurance angered him, and the remembrance of what his mother had hinted. "I'm going to see her. I'm not going to leave this house until I have. You don't think you can prevent me, do you?" he said, advancing threateningly.

"Don't be childish. You are not a boy. This is not a case for fisticuffs. If she does not wish to see you, I shall protect her from intrusion, this is my father's house; violence will have no effect on me."

Desmond dropped his hands. He had no quarrel with Michael, and felt no jealousy now that he stood before him. Eunice had always laughed at Michael, at his eye-glass and stiff manner. Michael had looked after him when he was ill, shown himself a friend. He was ashamed of his first instinct.

"Will you bring her down to me? Will you tell her that it is vital I should see her at once?"

"But is it?"

Michael knew nothing of what had been occurring at Marley, of Sir Simeon Greenlees and his verdict.

"She has broken off her engagement to you, and does not wish to be importuned."

"I won't importune her, you can tell her that. I will not

even speak of what is between us—at least, not yet. But I have a message from my mother. I must see her face to face and give her my mother's message."

"Give it to me."

"No; I'm going to give it to her. What are you afraid of?"

"Of not carrying out her wishes," Michael answered.

But it was not quite true. Desmond may have looked little more than a boy, but it was folly to deny that he was a handsome one, with grace and glamour about him. Michael stood irresolutely. He did not want them to meet. Yet if she were not strong enough to resist him now, she would never be strong enough. It was a test. If she saw him and said to his face what she had said behind his back—that she hated him, and would have nothing more to do with him—then—then he might dismiss his scruples. Desmond went on:

"I give you my word I won't even talk to her about myself—not yet, not now. You can be there if you like." He could afford to be generous; this could be no rival of his, this slow, impeccable Michael. "She needn't see me alone if she doesn't want to."

"Very well, then. Wait here. I'll go up."

Michael went slowly, deliberately, not as Desmond would have gone to the girl he loved. All Michael's methods and his manners were different.

He called his sisters out of the room and said quite calmly that he wished to see Eunice alone. He even waited to wash his hands and make his hair smooth before he went to her.

But when he saw her pallor and distress, and noted her irresolution, his heart sank. Not like this had she been yesterday. Yesterday she had clung to him, urged him.

"I don't feel safe without you," she had said. "Michael, save me, help me! If you don't marry me, I don't know what I shall do."

Michael had refrained as far as possible from letting her know what her appeal to him meant, how it affected him. He had reassured and soothed her, promised he would stand, if necessary, between her and Desmond, between her and her

aunt, that nobody should force or over-persuade her. His heart had swelled with tenderness; he had desired her above everything. But what was essential was her happiness. In the night he had thought he could give it to her. This morning he looked upon her face and his heart sank.

"Do you feel better this morning?" was the way he began. Yesterday she had sobbed in his arms—in his arms! But she never knew they were around her. He knew even then how impersonal it had been, that to her he was not a man at all, only a shelter from this evil thing that had come to her, from the sight of Desmond's child.

"You know that Desmond is downstairs?"

"I know."

"He is very urgent about seeing you—insistent. He says he comes from your aunt."

Her lips trembled. Desmond was downstairs; the cords were pulling, pulling all the time. Perhaps he could explain. She felt her own weakness, and knew that no explanation was possible. The flush rushed to her face; and the flush heated Michael's slow blood.

"I—I can't see him," she faltered.

Michael went a step nearer to her.

"You need not. I will take care of you, since you have given me the right——"

Given him the right! Michael, Michael McKay! He saw her eyes dilate. But for the moment he was less master of himself than usual.

"I have thought it over. I know now there is no other way, you were quite right, he will never leave you alone; they will never leave you alone. But if you were my wife—when you are my wife——"

"Oh, Michael, don't—*don't*."

He would have put his arms round her. She shrank from him. He saw the revulsion in her face and her dilated eyes, her retreat.

"I—I didn't mean it," she faltered. Now Michael went as pale as she.

"You said you wished to marry me to-day, as soon as possible——"

"I—I didn't think of—of——"

"Of kissing me?" He went as red as he had been pale. Is that it?" He stood quite near her, but he did not touch her. "You had not thought of that?"

"No."

"Yet it has to be thought of." He could only woo her in his own way.

"I didn't think of that." She was panting, frightened, shrinking.

"Think now."

"I couldn't—couldn't——"

"Bear me near you?" He spoke low. His arms ached for her, literally ached. His heart ached too, but to that he was accustomed.

"You said you wished to marry me." He repeated it, but he knew how long ago that seemed, how far away, that now she could not bear him to touch her.

"I know. You'll never forgive me; I know you can never forgive me."

"It's not a question of forgiveness." And then he was silent. "It is no question of forgiveness," he said again. "I was there for you to use. I am here for you to use. I only want you to be sure this time. You don't want me——"

"I *do* want you."

She was ashamed of herself now, and sorry, very sorry for Michael. She could not let him kiss her, she could not bear his arms round her; she could never care for Michael like that—never. She saw his eye-glass and smooth hair and bony hands; all her body shrank from him.

"Not for your husband?" The crimson flooded her, the blood beat in her temples.

"Oh, no, no!" She said she was sorry, but his hurt went deeper than she could know.

"Do forgive me," she asked again.

"It doesn't matter," he answered stiffly. He turned away from her; he did not want her to see what it meant to him

that she shrank from his touch, cowered away from his kiss as if from a blow; that to-day she could not even bear to think of him as her husband. "It doesn't matter." Then he pulled himself together, speaking in a different tone. He had to face the position, and face it so that she should not know the cost to him. Yesterday she had cried on his shoulder; yesterday she had asked his protection. Well, she had had it. And the night had been his own. He had had that night of dreaming.

"Will you see your cousin?" he asked, as if yesterday she had not said she would never see him again. "He says he comes from your aunt, bearing a message from her."

"Ought I to?"

"How should I know?" He spoke roughly, but recollected himself, and went on more quietly, "What is your own feeling?" She answered truthfully:

"Frightened. I am frightened."

"He has promised not to importune you." Her flush was painful.

"You'll stay, won't you? You'll stay here if I have to see him?"

"I shall do whatever you require."

"He is not to talk to me; he is only to give me the message."

"I will tell him."

Michael knew—he knew before he went to fetch Desmond what she feared. It was herself. Reaction had been succeeded by reaction, and to-day she did not hate Desmond any more. How could she, after those long years? She was one burning flush, inside and outside, when she thought of him, and that he had been untrue to her. But she did not hate him.

Michael delivered her message accurately, and Desmond gave the required promise. Eunice tried to be dignified when he came in—dignified with Desmond! She would not look at him. Her eyes could not meet his, and his, too, were averted.

"You have a message?" She meant her voice to be very cold and dignified, but it was only faltering.

"From my mother."

"What is it?"

"She is much worse."

"Not—not——?"

"Dr. Reid and Sir Simeon Greenlees say so. She wants you to come back—to come back at once with me. She wants to say good-bye to you."

There was a break in his voice. Her quick tears rose, her face paled, her voice stammered.

"You—you are sure I shall be in time?"

"We must catch the two-five."

They were only conscious of each other. Eunice had a faint disloyal doubt whether it was a ruse, a ruse to get her back. But she wanted to go. Oh, how much she wanted to go! There, at Marley, was home. Here was Michael with his reproachful face. Was it reproachful? She could not see through the tears that gathered, when she said again:

"You are sure—you are sure that I shall be in time?"

"*She* was sure."

In the cab on the way to the station she stole a glance at Desmond, and saw his eyes were swollen. She wanted to put her hand in his; they had always comforted each other. But she refrained, remembering that he had deceived her, and that there had been another woman and a baby. In the railway carriage, on the way to Marley, they hardly spoke to each other, or spoke as strangers. It was so unusual, like something that could not be happening. She pretended to look at the pictures in the illustrated papers, and he looked out of the window. Only as they neared Marley, when they were within a minute or two of the station and the speed was already slackening, he spoke:

"You said I wasn't to speak to you, but you've got to hear this. They—she," he blurted it out, "Biddy and the baby are at the Court. My mother does not know, and it is to be kept from her. I suppose that will make your coming back worse than ever. I can't help it—I can't turn them away." His voice lowered. "I suppose you hate to be under the same roof with her, that you hate the very thought of her." His voice was not only lowered, but broken.

"I don't hate her, I don't want her to be anywhere else. She has the right to be at Marley."

"If nothing had happened, it is you who would have had to decide who should or should not be at Marley. We should have been married by now. And if mother was too ill to say what was to be done, you'd have had to say it."

Her heart fluttered; that Desmond should be speaking to her like this was unreal. Desmond! Whenever he had been in disgrace or distress she had comforted him, helped him. Now, when he looked more unhappy than ever he had done before, she had nothing comforting to say to him.

"I never thought of hating the baby. Of course, it ought to be there," she said violently, and then stopped, flushed. "I'll never forgive you for not having told me," she went on vehemently. "I wish you wouldn't speak to me; I don't want to talk to you. I had to come back because you said she wanted to say good-bye to me. . . ."

"You don't seem to care how unhappy I am."

"It's your own fault."

"Do you think you need remind me?"

"I don't want to remind you. I don't want to speak to you." He opened his mouth as if to remonstrate or plead, but thought better of it. He had promised not to importune or hurry her, she was coming back to the Court, it was impossible to think of her as being like this with him always.

In an unnatural silence they completed their journey, driving to the Court as they had driven to Paddington, without words, but acutely conscious of each other's proximity.

CHAPTER XXX

BUT once she was back at the Court it was as if she had never left; they all combined to make her feel it. Michael's father met them at the lodge gate and praised her, saying she was a good girl to come. Desmond, before she went up to her aunt's room, contrived to say:

"I'll keep out of your way as much as possible."

Lady Grindelay's first words were:

"Was the train late?" as if she had been watching and wearying for her. There was no allusion that day to the reason for her going nor the necessity for her return.

An operation might have hastened the end. Without it the patient lingered. Andrew went back to town, but came down every evening, sleeping in the house, at Agatha's request. There were a few days when she suffered intensely, and everyone, even the nurses, hoped the agony would not be prolonged.

"Such a long passage, such a long and difficult passage," she was heard to murmur. Death came slowly; she was very brave, but she did complain sometimes that it came slowly.

The question of the operation was raised again, but she was steady in refusing it, and in saying that she would die a natural death. Dr. Reid and his son Jack, who were both in attendance now, took different views. Dr. Reid upheld her, Jack argued all the time. He thought nothing was being done that ought to be done. A dozen new scientific experiments occurred to him; he was ultra-modern, up to date. The old man knew that when the fiat has gone forth neither drugs nor the surgeon's knife can avail.

"Leave her in peace, cease arguing with her," he told Jack. "Is it worth while to give her a few weeks longer, or even months? She is beyond cure."

Jack thought differently. He was seven-and-twenty, and had learnt everything the London and Paris hospitals could teach him, he had also been to Berlin and Vienna. Death

seemed almost an incredible thing to him; there were so many new weapons with which to fight it.

Jack had another patient in the house just now. Biddy and the baby remained, and Jack tried many of his experiments on the baby. If it thrived it was in spite of them.

Lady Grindelay knew now of these strange inmates in her house. How she came to know was difficult to decide. But one day she said:

"It is that woman's child I hear, I suppose! Is it because of her you will not marry Desmond?"

Startled, Eunice answered quickly:

"Yes."

But it was not true. If it had been it was so no longer. She had heard Desmond's story by now. Living in the same house, often in the sick room together, where Lady Grindelay summoned them in her intervals of consciousness, it had been impossible to avoid him. They both cared for this old woman who lay dying. They cried about her sometimes, thinking it terrible she should have to suffer so cruelly. Their tears brought them together.

"Poor auntie," Eunice would say pitifully.

"Isn't it awful?" Desmond would reply, his eyes wet.

"Can't anything more be done for her? When I see her so brave, and then hear her moan, I'm beside myself. I sometimes think I've only just got to care about her, to understand her."

Eunice had to comfort him. Just as he had to try and explain the past to her, for all she had told him she did not want to hear. He could not tell his story very well, nor convincingly, but haltingly and lamely. How could he explain Nurse Radlett to the girl? He could not explain her to himself, nor how he had fallen.

"She is married now, anyway. I shall never see or hear from her again. She wrote that to the McKays, and that I was welcome to the child. Don't you think it awful when a baby has neither a father nor a mother—only Biddy? I suppose I ought not to be mentioning her to you at all. I wish you didn't feel so badly about her," he said unhappily.

Nobody knew, least of all Desmond, that Eunice did not feel badly about the baby nor resent her presence.

Often, so often, without Desmond or anyone knowing of it, she had stopped at the nursery door, gone in, seen the baby girlie lying on a rug, crowing or trying to talk; so often she had taken it into her arms! All her instincts should have been against the child, but they were not, they yearned to her in tearful tenderness. But in secret, always in secret. She was for ever telling herself that she was no longer in love with Desmond, he had deceived her, kept things from her. But now her anger had died down, and she believed her aunt was responsible for his reticence. She did not allow her mind to dwell upon the woman, married now and out of his life. In secret, and half ashamedly, she haunted the nursery, found herself unable to keep away, crying over the baby sometimes because it was motherless and without anyone to love it. Such a darling baby, too, so small and sweet, a cuddly baby. It learnt to know her, held out appealing arms, gurgled at her. When she held the little one in her arms it was difficult to put her down again.

There are born mothers in the world as there are born poets, and Eunice was one of these. Day by day this baby found a way into her heart. Many and many a time when she stole into the room to see the child undressed, she forgot everything concerning her except that she was a baby, soft to touch and sweet to hold. Reynolds as well as Biddy knew of these stolen visits of the girl. No one else, not Desmond, nor, of course, the dying woman.

* * * * *

There came a day when there was a cessation in Lady Grindelay's constant pain, some new era or change took place in the disease. The great weight of disaster was lifted temporarily from the home, the head of the household was not going to die, she was getting better. We have all seen such deathbed revivals, and only the young and inexperienced take hope from them. Eunice and Desmond were both. Lady

Grindelay, although she knew better, led them on. She crowed over nurses and doctors.

"Didn't I tell you so?" she said. "Didn't I tell you I was not going to die yet?"

The improvement in her health had its inevitable consequence. The reins had slipped, not fallen, and now she was for gathering them up again.

"How are matters between you and Eunice?" she asked Desmond when he was alone with her.

"In a way we are friends," he answered hesitatingly. He was sure and unsure. She avoided him, ran from him, but he had once made her admit that she *did* believe he had never cared for anybody else. "It is only the child that is between us," he told his mother.

"I must see you married before I die. You can be married here, by my bedside, you can wait for your honeymoon until I'm gone. I want to see you happy."

"You'll never persuade her, I fear. If you only could!"

After that it was easy to see the dying woman thought of nothing else. It was wonderful how her brain still worked in her tortured body, how nothing counted with her now but her son's happiness.

"You shall neither see nor hear of the child. Of course it ought never to have been brought here—would not have been but for my illness. I will provide for her. Do not be obstinate, Eunice. Desmond has done nothing to excuse you behaving so badly to him. Every man has some such history in his life. My poor boy must not suffer because there are bad women in the world, and one met him when he was weak, a Delilah against whom he was never warned. I ought to have warned him. I sent him away from me without a safeguard. He must have a wife, I understand that now. You must not think only of yourself."

"I'm not thinking only of myself."

"The child will be provided for."

"I don't care for Desmond as I used."

"I can't leave him in loneliness."

"I don't want to marry him."

Lady Grindelay deemed that was of little consequence, one has to remember she had been a long time under drugs. She told Desmond to get a special licence, she thought the opportunity for using it would come. Her whole mind was set upon how to bring about the marriage.

The last time Eunice told her aunt she would not marry Desmond, that nothing would induce her to, that she did not care for him any more, was the day when the revival of Lady Grindelay was at its height, and even Reynolds began to think a miracle might be wrought. Desmond was full of hope, his spirits rose unconsciously. He talked with his mother, in her new and strange recrudescence, about what was to be done with Biddy and the child. Whatever it was to be, must be done quickly. He would not forget his obligations, but both he and Lady Grindelay agreed that it must be sent from Marley, away for the moment from the girl's sight.

"She must be brought to forget it. When you have the licence I will make the opportunity for you to use it. She will not disregard my last wish, my dying wish."

"But you are getting better." He was sitting by the bed, and he put his head on the pillow beside her own. "You don't know how bad it was when you were in pain, mother; you'll get well now? Everything will come right if you get well."

To have him lying there, his handsome curly head so near, his loving words in her ear, was wonderful to her, a happiness she must deserve.

"I will get well if I can. There are so many things I want to say to you. You came to me when I was already old, I knew so little about boys and men. And men! I have never cared for any man but you. Other women are not like that, and I . . . I found it out too late. Lying here, I see so many of my mistakes. Andrew was right; I ought never to have tried to stand alone. I want to put everything right before I go, I want to see you married."

"Dear old mother!"

"You must have someone to care for you when I am gone.

There are women who should never marry. I was one of them, but Eunice is different."

"If you had never married there would never have been me. Say you are glad I am here."

"I am only thinking how I can make up to you for all you have missed."

"I haven't missed anything."

"Only a mother," she said rather pitifully, her old lips aquiver. "But I will give you a wife. Go and talk to her now. I want to be alone——"

* * * * *

When he found her, he began gingerly. Eunice was not as even-tempered as she had been; she flamed out on slight provocation. She who had once been content to fetch and carry for him, now eluded and evaded him, would sometimes speak to him and sometimes not, keeping him humble.

"Will you come and see the orchid with me? Mother wants us to report upon it to her. Sanders sent up word to say that all the spikes are in bloom."

Eunice made one excuse or another, said she had to go to the town, she did not want to go out, that it was not necessary they should visit the orchid house together. But when he met excuse after excuse and persisted, she yielded, not with a good grace, but impulsively, becoming silent after she had agreed to go with him.

When they were going towards the hot-house he said tentatively:

"She is going to sleep until four; Reynolds is darkening the room; she wants to be alone. When we've seen the orchid we might go into the woods."

"I don't want to go into the woods," she answered hastily, "not with you."

"Never?"

"Never!" She quickened her step.

There was no doubt about the orchid or the correctness of Sanders' report. From the glass roof of the steaming house there hung down great masses and clusters of bloom,

shy, still in their sheath of green, but giving rare promise. They gazed at it in wonder, it was a thing for anyone to wonder at. Fifty years it had hung there, dry and arid, then green, but never like this.

"If she could only have seen it!"

When they spoke of Lady Grindelay, and the improbability of her seeing it, their hearts grew tender. She had been such a force about them, her influence the most dominating thing in their lives, her kindness unending. They began to talk of her illness, to say she might yet see the flowers, to remind each other that a week ago she could hardly talk to them, was always under morphia, but that to-day she had sat up in bed.

Talking, they moved out of the steaming house. Now they were in the air again, feeling the slight chill. But the sun shone, the afternoon sun.

"We've got to face it," he began suddenly, a little desperately perhaps. "Look here, Eunice. What's the good of going on like this, hiding our heads? We've got to talk it out."

"I don't know what you mean." But she did. "I'm going back to the house."

"No, you're not," he caught hold of her arm.

"You're hurting me."

"And don't you think you're hurting me? What do you imagine I'm feeling day after day, when you hardly look at me? I thought we'd made it up."

Made it up! The old childish phrase. How dared he? She shook herself free from him, or she would have done, but he held her fast.

"I'm not going to let you go just yet. I'm not a criminal. You may not care for me any more, but I am not a criminal."

Her heart was water and ran to him, but her words were hail and fell upon him. He could not see her heart; he surmised, but could not see it.

"I don't care what you are, you are nothing to me." Her flush belied her words. "What is the use of pretending we are intimates, or friends? I should always feel now that you were keeping things from me."

"No, you don't, you know I'm not, that I never would again. Come into the woods."

"I don't want to talk to you."

"I know, but you must; we must do something, arrange something. She talks of nothing else, nothing but you and me together here. She wants me to get a special licence, that we should be married by her bedside."

"She doesn't know what I feel about it; neither do you, I believe. When I think about marrying you, or she speaks about it to me, I—I can't bear it." There was an indignant sob in her throat. "I get hot and angry, I can't say the words I mean. You know yourself it's impossible."

"No, I don't. I've never cared for anyone else."

"Not even for your poor little baby?"

"You think of her all the time, brood upon her."

"I don't brood upon her."

"You're first with me, you'll always be first. I can't argue with you. Come into the woods, let us talk. You and I can't go on like this, half-strangers; when it used to be so beautiful between us. I want to know all you are thinking, everything that is in your heart about me."

She went with him ultimately, feigning reluctance, persisting that she had nothing to say to him. He led her, not without design, perhaps, to that oasis in the woods where reigned the giant oak whose leaves had rustled above them the first time that he told her it was not as a sister he loved her. He could not guess how often she had sat there since, her heart full of him. Here she had dreamed her dreams, wept for his wounds, sat agonised when there came no news of him, felt his presence when he was not beside her. This was his tree and hers, always she had thought of it so.

"Eunice," his voice pleaded, "how often we've played here. You haven't forgotten it, have you? You don't really hate me? You can't. We could not feel differently about each other—not really differently. However bad you thought me you'd always remember our good days together."

Tears were rising, not in her eyes, but in her heart.

"You used to love me, not like I did you, but so sweetly. And I meant to teach you better."

How well she had loved him, a thousand times more than he could ever have loved her. The tears began to fall.

"Let me look at you, don't turn your face from me." But she leaned against the tree, and he never saw her tears. "Well, look away if you like, but you've got to hear what I say; I'm almost at the end of my tether. We ought to have been married three weeks ago, we should have been married if it had not been for this. I should have told you everything, I should have told you on our wedding-night. Now I'm desperate and half afraid; but you've got to hear it." There was a pause, and then he began again. "I was little more than a boy, I'd been ill, was feeling neglected; you both stayed away, although I was at death's door. The thing one must not say, that I ought not to say, I am going to say to you, because"—his voice faltered—"because you were so nearly my wife."

"But she was—she was quite your wife."

"That's cruel, don't be cruel, Eunice, it isn't like you. I can't sleep and I can't eat; you can see it for yourself. I act before my mother, but I can't go on acting much longer, and besides, she knows how it is with me. What I am telling you now is what no man should tell anyone, except, perhaps, his wife. And I'm not sure he ought to tell her. *She . . . she offered herself to me.*"

His voice fell, his face and eyes flushed.

"I ought not to say it, but I must, I—of course I ought to have resisted; I did resist at first. I was only a boy—Eunice, my love, my sweetheart, my little innocent. Oh, God! how can I make you understand?" There were beads of perspiration on his forehead. "I was only nineteen. She came to me——"

He broke off, he could not go on. But presently she found herself in his arms, their tears mingling.

"Don't tell me any more."

"Forgive me, forgive me. I've never loved anyone else."

"Let me forget it—make me forget it."

"I will. I swear I will. Kiss me. Say everything is as it used to be——"

"Oh! Desmond!" she said wildly.

* * * * *

He told his mother that evening what he understood, or misunderstood himself. That it was all right between them, but Eunice had better not be hurried. The baby must be got out of the house, she must be given time to forget. He could wait now, now that he knew she still cared for him and would never leave them again.

CHAPTER XXXI

LATER on, after Lady Grindelay had been settled up for the night, and Desmond and Eunice were both happily asleep, dreaming, perhaps, of each other, two things happened under the roof that sheltered them; two unrelated things.

Biddy, who for an unwonted time had kept sober, got drunk. She drank steadily all through the day and night, and at daybreak lay in a drunken sleep. That was the first.

The second was that Lady Grindelay, about three o'clock in the morning, suddenly, and for no ostensible cause, found herself broad awake, with the knowledge, cold and incontrovertible, that the end was in sight. She was not in pain, although pain lay in wait. But she was dying—dying. The world was to go on without her; her charities at Marley, all she had done and left undone; Desmond. Dying! How strange it was, and dreary and cold; the cold was perhaps the worst.

She was very tired, exhausted with her long struggle, needing rest. She looked at pale Death and smiled. Only for a moment; then her face changed. Through the lethargy that had almost fallen upon her broke that familiar call of conscience. Her work was not done. Here there was nothing waiting for her but pain. There, with Death, was rest. But she could not go.

She began to think of her son, and, strangely enough, of Andrew McKay. Both of them had asked gifts from her and both she had sent empty away; she, who loved giving! For Andrew it was too late, there was no use thinking about it. But Desmond! She owed him so much, she had not been a tender or comprehending mother in those early days. Now he seemed to fill the world. She had loved no man until this one grew to manhood. And she knew now, although it was so late, what love meant, what was the fulfilment of it.

"My son!"

Into the words had come passion; they were like a new and passionate prayer on her dying lips. She must do something for him before she went. There was nothing else in her mind. For herself she wanted neither salvation nor solace; she desired only to give him a last gift before she died. She would live until the next day, see them married by her bedside, leave someone in her place to care for him. She was resolute to stay until she had done this.

At three o'clock the nurse brought her medicine; a morphia cachet to be dissolved in lemonade. She had already determined she would not take it; knowing it dulled her mind as well as her body. Pain or no pain she would keep her mind clear until she had arranged for Desmond and Eunice to be married by her bedside, and so had given him his bride.

Her hands were swollen and a little stiff; the night nurse was yawning and unobservant. Lady Grindelay took the cachet, and let it fall into her lemonade. When the nurse held the glass to her lips, thinking she had swallowed it, she moistened her lips only, then watched the white envelope melt and sink, discharging its contents.

The nurse went back to her sofa, and Agatha lay and thought of her son. The first thing in the morning she would send for a clergyman, not to absolve her, there was no time, and she was not thinking of herself, but only of her son, and his young, yearning manhood, of how little she had ever done for him, of all her mistakes. In the morning the clergyman should marry them by her bedside, then there would be nothing to keep her here, she could rest.

Slowly the dawn crept into the room—the night nurse slept peacefully and well. Agatha lay awake and suffered.

She thought it was the presence of the baby upstairs that kept Eunice so reluctant and shy of Desmond. It ought never to have come here, never to have come to Marley.

When she repeated that to herself she heard the baby crying; crying in the night. It was a dream, of course, a dying woman's dream. She was sensible enough to know that. For the child was a long way from her, in another wing of the house.

The light grew stronger. Not the light at the end of the channel where pale Death stood to welcome her, but the dawn in the room.

At seven o'clock the night nurse yawned and stretched herself, and woke again. Meeting Lady Grindelay's eyes, she said:

"You've had a nice sleep, haven't you? Shall I make you a cup of tea, or will you have your lemonade?"

In the lemonade lay her surcease from pain, the end of the conflict.

"I will have the lemonade later. Pull up the blinds, find out if Miss Eunice is up, I want to see her as soon as she is dressed." She wanted to tell Eunice what she had planned.

"I don't think anyone in the house is up yet, it is very early," yawned the nurse. She was hardly awake. She had slept all the afternoon and most of the night, and was still sleepy.

"I hear them stirring," Lady Grindelay persisted. But what she heard was the baby crying, as she had heard it these last two hours.

This time it was not a dream, it could not be a dream, a baby *was* crying outside her room, and she heard Eunice too, and voices raised as if in altercation, Reynolds's voice, and Eunice's.

"What is the matter?" she asked. "What is the matter? Open the door." Pale Death had vanished from the room. She was back here in Marley, in her own bedroom, with work to do.

Eunice was outside, sobbing and excited. Reynolds was trying to prevent her coming in, was arguing with her, Lady Grindelay heard what they were saying.

"She was sitting up yesterday. I'm sure she won't mind my going in; I know she is awake because I heard the blinds being pulled up. She must see baby; she will know what we ought to do. Let me pass."

"Come in, come in," the weak voice called out. The nurse opened the door. "What is the matter?"

Eunice had a screaming baby in her arms. From where

Agatha lay, grey among her pillows, feeling the cold creeping to her, she saw them both.

Her aunt might have been better or worse; it was true that yesterday she had been sitting up. Eunice had really no eyes for her, she was completely absorbed in the baby.

"I heard her crying and crying, I listened at the door in the night and heard her crying. I couldn't make Biddy hear. She was snoring, lying on her back. I took baby away into my own bed, and tried to comfort her. But she got worse and worse." Her tears were falling on the baby's convulsed and twitching face; "Auntie, there is something the matter, I'm sure she is in pain, I don't know what to do."

"Come nearer."

"Reynolds said I was not to disturb you, but no one else knows what to do for her."

"You were right to come."

Reynolds interposed that she had already sent for the doctor.

"He can't be here for an hour," Eunice answered.

On a wave of semi-consciousness, with pain as an under-current, Agatha became confused as to what was happening; the room seemed over full of people from Little Marley and Great Marley, coming to her for help—a great concourse of them. She brought herself back with an effort, and now all she heard was the girl crying over the baby, Desmond's baby. That was why she had not married Desmond. Was that why she was crying? Eunice went on talking, coming nearer to the bed, but looking only at the baby in her arms, never at her aunt.

"She is so fearfully restless, I can hardly hold her. I gave her a teaspoonful of milk, and she sucked and sucked the spoon; her throat and eyes seem parched, and she screams or moans all the time."

Reynolds, full of concern for her mistress, would have taken the child, but Eunice resisted.

"Give her to me, don't trouble your aunt, Miss Eunice—the doctor will soon be here."

"Lay it beside me."

Of course her mind was not in a normal condition, it was floating somewhere on the borderland, as it had been these last few hours.

Eunice laid the baby gently beside her.

"I was right to bring her to you, wasn't I? Jack Reid can't be here for an hour. What do you think it is? I didn't startle you, did I? I knew you were awake."

"You were quite right."

Reynolds, now that the matter had been taken out of her hands, began to retail the child's symptoms. She, too, had always depended upon Lady Grindelay. Neither of them noticed the change in her.

Eunice only said again:

"Can't you do something, auntie, before the doctor comes?"

Eunice was almost beside herself in face of the inarticulate suffering and her inability to assuage it.

Agatha lay still whilst Reynolds told of the strange symptoms. Her mind was not quite there, although they thought she was listening.

"I must say I've never seen anything like it. She seems not to see what's before her, to be wandering, and then excited. Her cries are hoarse, but it isn't croup. And look how thirsty she is. Miss Eunice gave her milk, but I let her sup a little water. Look at her now."

The baby tried to sit up; the excitement of which Reynolds spoke was in the scarlet cheeks and groping arms and cries.

"That's your lemonade she's after now. Poor lamb, she's parched with thirst."

The dying woman was swaying on those waves of semi-consciousness, the pain almost submerging her.

"It's your lemonade the poor little thing is after."

"Give it to her."

"I need not give her your lemonade; I'll get some water," Reynolds answered.

"There's a fresh jug outside," Eunice said quickly. She took up the cup. "Shall I give it to her, auntie?"

"Give me the cup."

Two red spots burned now in her grey cheeks. In the lemonade was surcease from pain; she would give that, or anything, that Eunice should not cry, should give herself happily to Desmond, should not cry about his baby. "Let me give it her myself."

Reynolds supported Lady Grindelay, helping her trembling hands when she tried to give the cup to the baby. The baby seized upon it as if it had been her bottle, only that at first her hands were like the hands of the blind, groping, and she caught the sleeve of Agatha's nightgown instead of the cup. But when the cup had been guided to her mouth she drank and drank thirstily, sucking it down; they could not get the cup away from her, she sucked and sucked. When she had finished all there was in it she let go, not until then. Reynolds laid Lady Grindelay back, and the baby beside her. The baby had grown quieter immediately. It was only then Reynolds saw how ill Lady Grindelay looked. She thought the exertion had been too much for her, that she had fainted.

"Oh, my goodness, look at her. Give me the smelling bottle—quick, nurse. Have you the brandy? Get the brandy!"

"I think she's better; I really think she seems easier," Eunice said, bending over the quieted baby.

Nurse came quickly at Reynolds's call, and she and the maid exchanged glances.

"You'd better take the child away," the nurse said hastily. Reynolds was holding the smelling salts; Agatha's nostrils were pinched, and her breath was fluttering. "You have sent for the doctor, haven't you?" she added in a low voice to Reynolds. "I do believe she's gone," the nurse said a minute later. "I can't feel her pulse." They could not get the brandy down.

Eunice went away as she was told, carrying the heavily breathing child. Vaguely she knew that her aunt had fainted, but it was for the baby she was concerned.

Dr. Reid came, and Jack with him. There were strychnine and ether, a cylinder of oxygen. Lady Grindelay was

not to be allowed to die. Science and the young man decreed it, and the old man could not restrain them. They succeeded in reviving her, and the first faint words they heard her say were:

"Did the clergyman come?"

Nobody knew she had asked for a clergyman. Nobody had thought of such a thing; it was so unlike Lady Grindelay, unexpected.

"We will send at once." It was Jack who answered. "You will rest quietly until then."

They gave her brandy and Valentine's juice, and another injection of strychnine; they *would* keep life in her.

She was very drowsy. "He won't be long, will he?"

"No, he won't be long."

But when the hastily summoned vicar arrived they would not disturb her. She was sleeping, her breathing calmer, the pulse improved. Jack Reid had justified himself.

Late that afternoon, when she woke to something more like consciousness, Andrew McKay was sitting by her side. The doctors were gone; they were still in the house, but all she knew was that they were not there, and that she and Andrew were alone.

"That is you, isn't it, Andrew?"

Her voice was very faint; it seemed to come from a long way off. Her lover, faithful, although unfulfilled, answered softly:

"Yes, Agatha, it is I. You've been asleep?"

"You know I am dying?"

"Yes."

"Don't be sorry. I'm glad to go."

He could not speak at that moment, and she seemed to be thinking.

"What is troubling me, Andrew?" she said again; she seemed to be confused. "It isn't the orchid, is it?"

He answered quietly:

"The orchid is in full bloom, glorious bloom."

"The blue flower." And she added, drowsily: "I never found it!"

He took her hand, the hand that lay outside the counterpane, no longer beautiful and slender, but heavy and swollen. He kissed it, nevertheless. Andrew, the staid and grizzled lawyer! He to be kissing her hand! Something like a smile seemed to drift over her face.

"You have been very faithful!"

He did not answer that.

"Is there anything I can do for you, dear?" His voice was stifled, speech was difficult.

"You would like a cutting. Tell Sanders I said you were to have a cutting."

He had been sitting there a long time, ever since the doctors had left. There was nothing more to be done, they had brought her back, but only for a short time; the light was on her face, the opalescent, unmistakable light. Andrew sat beside her and watched, but the nurse was within call.

"Desmond?" she asked presently.

"I will fetch him." He rose heavily, he was even now only second with her. "I'll fetch him."

She called him back; he heard that faint voice, a whisper from her would have reached him, but this was a call; hoarse, urgent.

"Stop—wait, Andrew! Andrew, what have I done?"

He came back; her breathing was quick, but it was her eyes that startled him; they had been dying eyes, half-closed and looking into the distance, now they were open and there was terror in them; Andrew thought it was terror. "My draught! I gave her my draught, so that Eunice should not cry. What have I done? Is it dead? Desmond's child?"

She asked it twice. And because it seemed she had consciousness enough left to wish to know, he answered her out of the depths of his wisdom, wisdom only of this world, but out of his love and comprehension of her also. He answered gently, and with her poor hand in his. As he spoke he felt a sudden quickening of that poor hand, a spasm.

"And if it be dead, Agatha, it is better so. Poor mite! She could never have been anything but a complication and a difficulty. She had no place here, no real place, nor any-

where! You're not distressed about anything, Agatha, are you?"

"How?" The word came out. None followed, but her awakened and dying eyes implored an answer.

"How did it die? You want to know how or why the baby died? Perhaps it was the Lord speaking. . . ."

He paused; Andrew McKay had always been a religious man. He thought now of the wisdom and goodness of God.

"Biddy has confessed," he continued. "The child was poisoned; it was an accident."

"Poisoned?"

Agatha's eyes were wide open with a terrified question. He answered soothingly.

"It is all right. I will see that the best is done for Biddy."

All the pangs of death assailed her; the shallow breath and faintness, the heart that beat and stopped, the desperate sickness, but she fought them all.

"Tell me."

"Biddy has confessed. Young Reid thought there was something the matter with the child's eyes; he was testing them with atropine. Biddy had orders to drop it in the eyes, one drop in each. Instead she gave it as medicine, the whole bottle. She has been crying and raving ever since, accusing herself."

"She didn't do it, Andrew; *I* did it!"

Agatha's voice was very faint. He thought she was wandering, and soothed her.

"Perhaps it was the Lord speaking. A good thing, perhaps. Don't dwell upon it."

"Andrew!"

"I'm here, dear."

"Andrew, help me!"

He went down on his knees, his stiff old knees; he thought it was help through the passage she wanted. His voice shook:

"Give her comfort and sure confidence in Thee, keep her in perpetual peace and safety, through Jesus Christ."

"Leave off praying, it is too late. I killed Desmond's child."

Andrew stood up.

"I did it, Andrew. So that Eunice should not cry; I did it for Desmond. I don't know why I did it. . . . I can't remember. Write it down. There's no barrier between them now. I did it for my son, for my Desmond, so that he should have his heart's desire. Now I can't die. . . ."

She left off speaking, but had not strength to close her eyes. Under the half-closed lids they were still alive and dreadful.

"You don't know what you are saying."

"I killed it, I know. I did it on purpose. . . ."

"No, Agatha, no; don't say so. It isn't true!"

"It wasn't Biddy," she said again.

The words came through, jerkily, and with difficulty, but they came through.

"The morphia was in the lemonade. My son, I was thinking of you, Eunice must not cry . . . you will be married this morning."

She went on murmuring, saying the same words over and over again.

The blood hammered in his head; phrases beat about, legal phrases.

"Misadventure; death by misadventure!" was the chief of them.

"It wasn't Biddy, Andrew. Write it down."

It might be true; *he knew it was true*. But what then? What then? Well, that he must save her from the consequences, save her memory. For soon that would be all there was left to save. He bent over her.

"Lie quiet, then; lie quiet, Agatha. I'll do what is right. You hear, don't you?"

She murmured something; he thought it was her son's name, that she said it was for him. When he went out of the room he walked like a very old man. He had to think what was to be done, how her secret was to be kept. But Biddy must not suffer. He must do the right thing. He

knew that what she had told him was true, and that she had blundered for the last time. He knew the child had been taken into her room that morning. *Agatha!* She had committed the dreadful irrevocable deed, and said it was on purpose, that there should be no barrier between Desmond and Eunice. There was blood on her hands. *Agatha!* Impossible to picture his agony of mind.

The old doctor met him outside the door of the sick-room.

"No change?" he asked.

Andrew stopped short; he did not know what he was going to say.

"I think there is a change," he said then, slowly.

"For the better?"

"Perhaps; she is not fully conscious, does not know what she is saying." Andrew would take no risks. "I don't think she knows what she is saying," he repeated.

"I am surprised if that is so. She was quite clear when I saw her last. I thought she would go out like that. A dear, good woman, her hand was always open. We shall miss her here in Marley."

He went in, closing the door behind him quietly.

Andrew stood still a minute. What was the best thing to do? She must make no confession, he had her reputation to guard, her high repute.

As he stood there in thought Desmond came down the stairs.

"I'm just rushing off to the chemist. Jack thinks now the child is coming round, reviving. Keep Biddy from going to the police station, will you? We don't want a scandal."

"Biddy?"

"She wants to give herself up."

"But that mustn't be allowed."

"I knew you'd agree about that."

Even now Andrew did not understand. If Biddy had not given the baby the wrong medicine, why had she confessed to having done so? Every step was a step in the dark, and his heart was aching. He went slowly upstairs, and Biddy's voice broke on his ear.

"An' didn't I have to coax and coax the darlint to ut, an' she, as if she knew, turnin' from ut agin an' agin, an' cryin' out an' fightin'. Och, but they'll be hangin' me in me grey hairs. Ochone! ochone!"

Biddy was rocking herself to and fro, scarcely recovered from her debauch, red-eyed and dishevelled. Reynolds was plying her with more brandy, wisely.

"You won't let her leave the house?" the lawyer said. Reynolds reassured him.

In the day nursery, where Andrew went next, Eunice sat on a low chair, with the baby girl in her arms. It did not seem like a dying child, only a sleeping one. And she held it as if it were an inestimable treasure, closely, with wet, thankful eyes.

Jack Reid leant against the mantelpiece, watching them with a gloomy face.

"I can't make it out," he said. "If Biddy had told us earlier I could have given an injection; now, of course, it is too late."

Eunice, speaking very softly, answered:

"Didn't Dr. Reid say you had better do nothing? She is sleeping so beautifully, little darling!"

But young and scientific doctors never do nothing. Nature belittles their learning, puts them to shame.

"I shall try an injection of morphia when Desmond gets back with it. The atropine bottle is empty."

"Biddy may have spilled some," Eunice suggested. "Baby may only have had very little; the bottle wasn't empty."

"But think of those symptoms you described. They'll come on again. This is only a breathing time; you'll see, she'll wake thirsty and confused."

That the baby should get well without treatment made the young doctor gloomy and doubtful. All the time he stood there he complained of the inaction to which his father had urged him after Biddy's confession.

"It's absurd to be doing nothing. I've half a mind to try mustard until Desmond comes back from the chemist."

Eunice held the threatened baby close. She was glad when Jack Reid went out of the room with the old lawyer.

Jack talked to Andrew as he went.

"I can't make it out at all. Biddy must have given the child, according to her own account, and judging from the state of the bottle, at least a twentieth of a grain. And that ought to have killed it; it was practically dying when I came. We lost between four and five hours through not knowing what had happened. Now it is sleeping calmly, pulse and breathing regular! Can there be anything in her constitution, I wonder, some abnormality?"

He had all his degrees, and began to talk scientifically about abnormal persons and their idiosyncracies, using strange-sounding words such as "idiopathy." Andrew listened with half an ear.

"I had made up my mind to give an injection of morphia. That's the antidote, you know. There is only one antidote. But I've run out of it. And then, what does the little beggar do but fall asleep? Now, father urges me to wait; but I think it is an awful risk. . . ."

Andrew was an intelligent lawyer, and, although he was so disturbed, his faculties were not obscured.

"The only possible antidote?" he said quickly. "The only possible antidote to what Biddy gave her?"

"That's so, there's nothing abstruse about that. It is in all the text books. 'In case of atropine poisoning, give morphia.'"

It was as if a weight were rolling off him, as if he could breathe again, and freely; as if the goodness of God were again made manifest.

"That explains everything," he exclaimed—"everything!"

"Explains everything!" Jack repeated, staring at him. "What do you mean?"

"The baby *has* been given the antidote."

"What antidote? Who has prescribed for it? There has been no one here but my father and myself."

"No one has prescribed it," Andrew said solemnly.

"By the mercy of God, by His great goodness, a mistake has been made."

"A mistake!" repeated Jack again, stupidly.

"The child has had the antidote. She was taken into Lady Grindelay's room this morning, as you know. She was given her lemonade to drink. There was a morphia cachet dissolved in the cup."

"Good God!"

"One of Lady Grindelay's morphia cachets."

"Good God!" Jack said again, and stared at him. After a moment's pause he added:

"Then I was right all through." Andrew never knew how he arrived at that conclusion.

"A quarter of a grain! I shouldn't have given her quite so much as that myself, though."

Back to Agatha's room again, and as swiftly as possible, went Andrew.

"Her vitality is extraordinary," the old doctor whispered as he met him. "She spoke of the orchid, said a spray was to be laid on her coffin. 'Mind Andrew has a cutting,' she said twice. She took me for Sanders, I suppose. She spoke of a magistrate! Do you think she could want to see Campden? They are old friends, I know. If so, he should be sent for without delay; the end is very near."

"No, she doesn't want to see Campden."

He went in, stood again beside the bed. Agatha's eyes were still alive under the drooping lids.

"Is it Desmond?"

"It is Andrew."

"What will they do to me?"

"Nothing."

"Has Desmond married Eunice? I can't remember—I can't remember anything. Does he think I did it on purpose? I wanted him to be happy, to help him!" She was very restless, talking quickly and sometimes incoherently; he had to stoop to hear her.

"There is nothing between them now. What does it matter about me? Let Eunice stay with you a little while—

with you and your girls. Then they can get married, and come back here. She would never have taken him with the child between them. I am glad I lived long enough to make everything right——” Her voice trailed off. “Is there blood upon my hands? Is this the end?” In her dying eyes were tears, the saddest, most dreadful sight. “My son, my little son, my strong, brave son, it was for you. . . .”

“You didn’t kill the child, Agatha. Grace has been given you—grace——” He wanted to tell her about the goodness of God, but a sob choked him. “You did not kill her, Agatha. *You saved her life.*”

“I . . .”

“The great and wonderful goodness of God saved her and you. You’ve no blood upon your hands. These dear hands have no stain upon them; try to listen, to understand. He would not let you do this wicked thing. He knew you were not yourself, dear—not yourself. You, who have been so good always, and charitable. He would not let you do this thing.”

She said something indistinguishable, and he went on:

“You gave her lemonade, and the morphia was in it. I know, dear, I know. What you gave her was the antidote—the antidote to what Biddy had administered in error. The *antidote*. You understand, don’t you? *You saved her life*—under God: in His mercy. You saved her life.”

Agatha opened her eyes; and it was upon Andrew they rested, for the last time.

“Did I? Another blunder . . . the last. . . .”

She spoke her own epitaph. The end had come, although the breathing went on for a long time. Jack Reid gave a name to it, and aired his knowledge. He said it was “Cheyne Stokes breathing.” But it did not matter what he said. Neither of the old men would let him disturb her. She had made her last mistake.

When Desmond came back with the medicine he went up to the nursery in his old way, two steps at a time. He stopped short when he saw Eunice there with his child in her arms.

The baby was held close in her arms, and she was crying; they were tears of thanksgiving; a minute ago the baby had opened her blue eyes, and smiled. Eunice was kissing the little soft face when Desmond stopped short at the door.

"You're crying!"

"She is better," she faltered.

He came over to her.

"But, Eunice, Eunice, you can't care——"

"I do—I do! I love her!" She held the infant closer.

"Then——" He fell on his knees beside her. "And the father of her?" he asked softly.

"You won't send her away?"

"I'll not take anything from you that you want."

He was kneeling, but the chair on which she sat was a low one, and he could wipe away her tears with his handkerchief.

"I may, mayn't I?" That, too, he had done before, when they were children, when she had fallen and hurt herself, and at all times of her young, light griefs or disappointments.

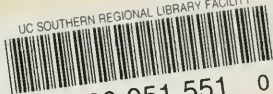
"You've forgiven me even this?"

"I want to be her mother, she shall never know any difference."

And she kept her word in the happy days that came, long after Agatha had been buried, a spray of the wonderful blue orchid on her coffin, and, more wonderful still, her memory for ever emblazoned and irradiated because, as Andrew McKay told them, at the end, out of the greatness of her love and generosity, and to crown her beautiful and unselfish life, she had given the draught that was to have eased her last pangs, her death pangs, to quench the baby's thirst, saving it thereby.

That was the way Andrew told the story, the way he came to believe it.

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